Love was a business for Laura !
PARTY GIRL
SHE EMBRACED MORE MEN IN A NIGHT THAN MOST WOMEN KNOW IN A LIFETIME !
By DON ELLIOTT
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THIS IS AN ORIGINAL NIGHTSTAND BOOK

McCarten Had Raped Her —

that had started it. She thought at first she would kill herself, but Laura was a strong girl, a hungry girl, fired with smoldering passions that often threatened to engulf her. So she did what seemed logical — she sold her young body for a price. At first is was ten dollars a customer, but when Phil Spinelli picked her out to work the Syndicate's party girl role, she found herself going for higher and higher prices. This is a searing, uncompromising novel of the big city today, glittering with the shattered pieces of women's lives. It's a story no one with a weak conscience should miss. Because Laura Haynes could be

Any Wife, Any Sister!

PARTY GIRL

By DON ELLIOTT

AN ORIGINAL NIGHTSTAND BOOK

PARTY GIRL

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CHAPTER ONE

THE MOMENT SHE WALKED INTO the theatrical agent's office, Laura Haynes found herself regretting it. There was no receptionist, only an owlish-looking man of about forty, and he stared up at her with intimate curiosity. His gaze seemed to go right through her clothes; it was as if with his eyes he could lay bare her full, firm breasts, her tawny thighs, her sleek, satiny buttocks. Laura had never been appraised in such a *knowing* way before. She felt color rising to her face, and fought back the urge to turn and run out. She stood grimly where she was.

"Are you Mr. McCarten?" she asked hesitantly.

His eyes were riveted to the rising sweep of her breasts. It was like being stark naked in front of him, Laura thought uncomfortably.

"That's right," he said. "Ned McCarten, just like it says on the door behind you. What can I do for you, Miss—Miss—?"

"Haynes. Laura Haynes."

"Sit down, Laura." He gestured to a chair to the left of his desk. As Laura walked across the room toward it, he followed the fluid sweep of her hips and buttocks eagerly with his eyes. She lowered herself into the chair and crossed her legs, hiking her skirt up above the knee. *Might as well give him a show,* Laura thought. *He's going to want to look anyway.*

He took in the display. Laura moistened her lips uneasily. McCarten said, "I suppose you want a job in show business, Miss Haynes?"

"That's right, Mr. McCarten." Her voice came out thin and squeaky, little-girlish.

"Make it Ned. Ned and Laura. Saves breath." He reached for a pad. "Okay, Laura. Let's start at the beginning. What can you do?"

"Well," Laura said nervously, "I can dance, I sing, I've done some acting—"

McCarten made idle scribbles on his notepad. He seemed uninterested.

The telephone rang, cutting Laura off. "Excuse me," McCarten said mechanically, and picked up the phone. While he talked, Laura glanced around the office. It was a squarish, cluttered room, opening onto a smaller room at the right. The larger room had a desk, a piano, an old leather couch, some bookshelves, and a table piled high with sheet music, magazines, and old copies of *Variety*. The prevailing impression was one of sloppiness and clut-

ter. On the walls were several dozen framed and signed photographs, none of them of people Laura recognized. Most of them were women. Laura was a little surprised to see that one picture, directly behind McCarten's desk, showed a totally nude girl, wearing not even a G-string. She was grinning gaily into the camera; her breasts were full and heavy, her hips ample, her thighs round and thick. Squinting, Laura made out the inscription in the corner of the photo: *To Ned McCarten, the man who made me . . . what I am. With love from Dawn Ryse.*

She wondered what sort of a girl would give a man a photo like that, with everything showing. Probably some strip-teaser, Laura thought, that McCarten had helped find work. She wondered about the inscription, whether it was just a joke or if perhaps there were some truth in it.

McCarten finished his conversation and hung up. "The damn fool," he muttered, looking up. "Expects me to produce miracles for him every time he snaps his fat fingers. Oh, well. Where were we?"

"You were asking me what I could do."

"Oh. That's right," McCarten said. He chewed speculatively at the end of his pencil. He was a short, squat man, going bald in the middle of his scalp. His face had a loose, sensuous look, but the eyes behind the thick glasses were fiery and intense. "You sing, you dance, and you act," he mused. "Any professional experience?"

"Not—really."

"What does that mean, 'not really'?" he asked sharply.

"I mean, not for very much money. I did some

singing at county fairs, local dances, you know. But you can't really count that as professional, can you?"

"No, you can't," McCarten agreed sourly. "Where are you from?"

"Kansas," she said. "Marshall, Kansas."

"And how long have you been in New York?"

"F-four days."

"And you're living with an aunt," he said. "Or else you have a room at the YWCA. Which is it?"

"I'm living at the Y," Laura said in surprise. "But how did you know?"

"It isn't telepathy, honey. Do you think you're the first girl who ever came from Kansas to New York to get into show business?" He drummed his pencil on the scarred desktop. "You're a rank greenhorn, no experience worth a damn. Well well well. How old are you?"

"Twenty-one."

"That on the level?"

"Of course. I was twenty-one last month. March 23 is my birthday."

"Okay, skip the genealogy. Parents living?"

"They died when I was a little girl. I lived with my grandparents."

"On the farm, I suppose. And you read the picture magazines and dreamed of coming to New York. And now you're here, expecting to be showered with gold."

"You're making fun of me," she said, reddening.

"I'm just feeling sorry for you, honey. I see so goddam many of you come this way. Apple-cheeked flowers of American womanhood, you know. All of you beating a track toward fame and fortune."

He shrugged. "How'd you come to pick me out of the book?"

"I looked up theatrical agents in the classified telephone directory. Your office was the closest one to the Y, so I came here first."

McCarten smiled. "Okay. You sing, you dance, you act, and you implore me to find work for you. Got anything special in mind? A Broadway lead, or prima ballerina at the Met, or—I'm sorry, Laura. What kind of work would you like to do?"

Laura was confused. Half the time McCarten seemed to be poking fun at her, the rest of the time he appeared almost paternally concerned about her. After a moment's hesitation she said, "I'm willing to begin anywhere, Mr. McCarten. A chorus line, if I have to. Just so I'm in show business, even at the bottom—"

He looked at his watch, as though growing bored with the interview. "Chorus girl, eh? Well, just for a starter, let's hear you sing." He pushed himself up out of his swivel chair and stalked across the room to the piano. "How about—ah—the Mary Martin thing from the Rodgers & Hammerstein show. Starts off *I'm as corny as Kansas in August.* Kansas girl ought to know that one."

"All right," Laura said.

McCarten gave her a brief introduction, nodded her a cue, and she sang. She was so nervous that she started off sharp, but after the first bar she got back on pitch and everything went well. With his back to her, McCarten's expression was hidden. He played through the first two verses, then suggested another Rodgers & Hammerstein tune. Laura sang

that one for him, and a third.

After the third song he swivelled around. "Okay," he said. "You can sing. Nothing spectacular, but at least it's easy on the ears and you can carry a tune. You started sharp on the first one."

"I know. I guess I was scared."

"Well, after that you were okay. But the country's full of girls who can carry a tune. You've got to have a figure, too." Again he eyed her in that speculative way, as though undressing her. He went from the piano to the closet, reached in, brought out some sort of costume. "Here," he said. "Get into this and let's have an idea of what's under the dress."

"Right here?"

He scowled. "Go into the next room, if you're bashful. I won't peek."

Uneasily, Laura took the costume from him and went into the smaller room. She closed the door. There was no way of locking it.

The small room was piled high with junk—more old newspapers, cartons of magazines, phonograph records, ledgers, all kinds of debris. Laura put her handbag down on top of a stack of trade journals and examined the costume McCarten had given her.

There wasn't much to it. Just a pair of blue panties with spangles, and a halter. They both looked a little small for her. With an uncertain glance at the closed door, she began to undress. There was a keyhole in the door, and she didn't trust McCarten very much. He was just the sort who would peep at her while she got into the cos-

tume, she thought. She moved to the side of the room, where she hoped she would be out of peeping range, and closed the dusty venetian blinds.

Her hands were trembling a little as she unbuttoned her blouse and carefully hung it over a chair. The plaid skirt came off next, then the half-slip. In the drafty office, she shivered a little in panties, bra, and garterbelt. Her hands went behind her back and she undid her bra, letting her breasts tumble free. She had an excellent figure, she knew. Her breasts were big, but not so big that they drooped or dangled. They thrust outward and upward from her chest, two rounded white globes tipped with little reddish-brown nipples.

Quickly she reached for the halter and put it on. It was tight, and she just barely managed to get her breasts into the cups and fasten the snap in back. Looking down, she reddened a little in embarrassment. The halter was so tight it was like a second skin; there were evident bumps at each nipple.

Hurriedly, now, she rolled the panties over her hips, took down her stockings, removed the pantybelt. She pulled the briefs up over her loins. They were really scanty, just a tight triangle of cloth round her waist. Craning her neck, she saw that several inches of buttock were exposed on either side in back. For a moment she hung back, frightened of showing herself to a strange man in a costume as revealing as this. The thighs and bra seemed designed for a smaller girl, and on her they were dreadfully provocative.

For a moment she came close to getting back into her street clothes and leaving. But that would

be foolish, she told herself. She wanted to have a career. She was going to have to show her body a little, if she hoped to get anywhere in show business.

She opened the door and walked into the other room.

McCarten was on the phone again, but the moment he saw her he said, "Excuse me, Phil. Something important just came up. Call me back in an hour, huh?"

Laura saw the reaction on his face. His fleshy mouth had sagged open, and his bloodshot eyes were wide with surprise. She knew she had made an impression on him. She stood by the door, throttling back her embarrassment, while his eyes roamed her body.

"Well?" she asked, smiling.

"You're okay," he said hoarsely. "That's a pretty good build you got."

"Do you think I can have a job?"

He smiled. "I'd say the prospect's pretty good. But let's keep the audition going. You know how to do a Charleston?"

"Yes."

"Okay, then. I'll play. You dance."

He went to the piano again, and pounded out a tune for her, looking back over his shoulder to watch her as she danced. Alone in the middle of the floor, she did the Charleston for him. There were some uneasy moments when she was sure her halter would break from her exertions. She began to sweat, and felt the globlets rolling down her almost bare body. McCarten seemed to be playing forever—hours and hours. Actually it was no more than three or

four minutes before he stopped.

He walked over to her, appraising her. She was almost as tall as he was, at her height of five feet five.

She was panting, and she was afraid she would catch a cold, heating up in this drafty office. But she said nothing.

McCarten said finally, "You're not a bad dancer. And you've got a swell figure."

"Thank you."

"I'm not complimenting you, I'm appraising you. No thanks needed. And I think I can get you work. Chorus-line stuff at first, better jobs later as you absorb professional polish. You've got a lot of natural ability. With voice training and a decent dance coach, you can go places. Just a couple of things that have to be checked, first."

"What are they?"

"Those," McCarten said. He extended two forked fingers. He was pointing at her breasts.

Laura blinked in surprise. "I don't understand."

"The knobs. The knockers, honey. Are they real?"

Color flamed in her face. "Of course they're real! I'm practically naked in this little thing, anyway. I couldn't be fooling anyone."

"I've got to be sure. Before I get you a job, I got to make certain you won't embarrass me. Like I mean, I send over a girl with a Size 38 bust, and the second day she has an accident with her bra and it turns out she's Size 33 with some foam rubber? That finishes me as a supplier for that particular chorus. So I got to make a hundred percent certain."

Laura felt chillier. "What do you want me to do to prove it?"

"The obvious, of course."

She took a step back. "But—show myself to you? I don't understand—"

"Do you want to get into show business or don't you?" McCarten demanded.

"Well, of course I do."

"Okay, then. I'm offering you a job worth $95 a week at the start, $120 after six months. And you're giving me the modesty act."

"I didn't think I'd have to undress myself to get a job. I'm sure other agents—"

"Other agents wouldn't even let you get past their receptionists," McCarten said flatly. "They don't bother fooling around with green talent. You were just lucky you walked in on a morning when I didn't have much to do, so I was able to give you a break. Just try going elsewhere, and see if you get anything. The contract's right there on my desk for you. I'll send you right over to the studio and you can start rehearsing this afternoon, and your first paycheck on Friday. Now, come on. Show me what you've got, baby. For Christ's sake, there's nothing so awful about displaying the body God gave you."

I don't want to, Laura thought frantically. *I don't want to show my nakedness to you. I'm not that sort of girl. But you've got a job for me.* Her throat went dry. What did it matter, just taking off the bra and letting him look? If it gave him satisfaction, and if he wouldn't let her have the job under any other conditions—

"All right," she said in a faint voice.

"There's a sensible girl."

Her cold fingers went behind her back. She fumbled with the catch for a moment, almost hoping that it would be impossible to get it open. But the hook left the eye and the tight halter sprang away from her breasts. She felt a sudden gust of cold air around them, and felt the flaming redness of her skin.

McCarten's eyes were like augers. He stared at the two high mounds with awed fascination.

"D-do I get the job?" Laura asked, stammering from shame. "Can I get dressed now?"

"Just a minute," he said in a strange, harsh voice. He moved toward her, and before she could step away or cry out he was up against her, his small soft hands cupping her breasts. She felt his pudgy fingers tightening over the ripe swells, felt his fingertips pressing on the suddenly hard tips of her nipples. His mouth was against hers, cutting off all outcry. His hands left her breasts, went to her hips. His fingers hooked into the waistband of her briefs and pulled them down over her thighs, and she was naked, and he had his hands on her buttocks, and then he was holding her in an unbreakable grip and carrying her to the leather couch.

She shoved his face away from hers. "Let go of me," she whimpered.

"Just one little thing more, honey," he crooned. "Then the job is yours. I promise—"

"No. No—I'm a virgin—"

He laughed harshly and pressed her down on the couch. She felt the cold leather against her back

and buttocks. She wanted to scream, to cry out, but her voice betrayed her in her extreme fright, and nothing emerged but a feeble little cry. He was kneeling above her, holding her down with one hand, unzipping his trousers with the other. She closed her eyes tightly, not wanting to see. She was weak and limp with terror at the unexpected attack. His weight was on her, now. She had her ankles locked together, but he slipped one foot between them, and the hard shoe brought a little cry of pain from her, and she was forced to break her grip, and the next moment he had spread her thighs apart and she felt the sudden agonizing thrust, and the world swirled around her crazily. She did not lose consciousness, but she felt dazed and stunned, and she was only dimly conscious of his body moving above hers, of the constant pain. And then she heard him shudder and let his breath out hoarsely, and it was over, and he was rising from her.

She looked at him in horror. *I've just been raped,* she thought inanely, her mind catching up to reality. *He threw me down on the couch and raped me.*

"I didn't know you really were a virgin," he mumbled. "Christ, I didn't think there were any virgins left. I figured you'd give me a good time, to earn the job. I didn't know—"

She shivered. Fire raged in her loins, and she looked down and saw blood on the couch and she realized she was at the edge of hysteria. All she knew was she had to get out of here. She pushed herself up from the couch and rushed past him into the other room and began to pull her clothes on.

He followed her in.

"Listen, baby," he implored. "Don't take it this way. I got carried away by the way you looked, and all. Christ, I never suspected—listen, calm down, I'll give you the job, everything will be all right—"

"I wouldn't take your filthy job!" she cried. With trembling fingers she buttoned her blouse. "Get out of my way!"

"Don't think you can call copper on me, honey," he said, his tone changing from a wheedling one to an angry one. "You don't have a case. I can claim you came in here and tried to twist my arm to give you a job, and pulled a tease act that made me lose my head at the last minute. Agents are always having girls come into the office and try to sleep their way into a job. The cops know the setup, and they'll believe me. So don't try running to them. Be a smart girl and take the job—"

"No!" she spat at him. She snatched up her handbag and ran past him, to the door, out into the hall. The world was reeling around her.

Raped, she thought.

She rang for the elevator.

CHAPTER TWO

IT WAS APRIL, BUT A COOL BREEZE was blowing down Broadway as she emerged from the building. She stood for a moment, still dazed by the rapidity with which it had happened. Her loins still throbbed painfully from the violent attack. She could still feel the touch of his hands on her breasts, the weight of his body above hers, the terrible moment when the castle of her body was penetrated—

She began to walk, knowing that she had to keep moving or she would crack. She walked mechanically, looking straight ahead, seeing nothing. The interview had turned into nightmare so rapidly that her mind still could not fully accept the happening, the transformation of herself in a few short minutes of urgent action from a virgin to a soiled woman. She had never thought it would happen this way. In Marshall, the boys had always regarded her as too pretty for them; they put her up on a pedestal, as the town's prettiest girl, and though everybody tried to date her no one made any serious passes at her. There were plenty of willing pimple-faced farm girls if they wanted sex. Laura had reached the age of twenty-one without any real experience of life. And now she had her experience. The hard way.

She kept walking, uptown. A big clock on a building in front of her read ten minutes to two. She did not want to go back to the Y. Somehow she knew she would never be able to face the other

girls, the matrons, all of them. They would be able to see at a glance what had happened to her, and she would never be able to face their smiles of pity.

She wondered what she was going to do now.

Go back home? Return to the farm and the sleepy little town, only a week after she had left it? Come home devirginized, raped, a sad advertisement of the terrors of big city life? That would be humiliating. *I went to New York to break into show business, but the first man I went to raped me and I came running home.* No, that would never do.

Go to the police? She was afraid to. McCarten was too shrewd. He would never have attacked her if he hadn't thought he could get away with it. He would come up with some angle to save himself. Her name would get into the papers, and she would become a figure of public contempt, the girl who yelled rape.

What then, she wondered? Go to some other agent? And meet the same kind of reception, she thought bleakly. One foot swung ahead of the other, step after step after step. Dazed, confused, she had no idea of where she was going, what would happen now.

She reached Columbus Circle. To her left, the towering bulk of the New York Coliseum loomed up. To the right were the plush hotels of Central Park South. Straight ahead was the park, just beginning to blossom into tentative greenness after the long winter. Numbly, Laura waited for the light to change, and went across into the park. The wind was colder there, with no buildings to block it, and she pulled her light coat tightly around her.

She found an empty bench and sat down, jamming her hands into her coat pockets. A squirrel ran up to her, waited for a peanut, and, getting none, scowled at her and went sprinting away. Laura tried to smile, but no smile would come.

She had started the day with such high hopes. She had made a list of five or six theatrical agents in the area near the Y, and she had planned to make the rounds until one of them found work for her, on television perhaps, or in a chorus line of a nightclub or show. And instead the day had turned into nightmare.

Why did he do it? she wondered. *Because he knew I was green, because he figured he could get away with it. Maybe he didn't even have a job for me. Maybe he was just sitting there with nothing to do, and when I walked in he figured he'd try to get all he could out of me.*

She sat there, brooding, feeling the pain still throbbing between her thighs. She wondered if he had done any permanent damage, torn something perhaps.

Maybe I'll kill myself, she thought suddenly.

The thought presented itself fully formed. She frowned in surprise as it appeared in her mind. She had never thought of suicide before. But, somehow, it seemed oddly appealing now. Here, alone in this strange city, friendless, her body polluted with a strange man's lust, it seemed a tempting way of wiping the slate clean. No more problems, no more discouragements, no more heartache. Just rest.

There's a lake somewhere in Central Park, isn't there? Maybe I could throw myself in. Or I

could jump off a tall building, or step in front of one of those speeding taxicabs.

There were so many possible ways of killing one's self in New York City. It was simplicity itself. Laura rose, with a vague idea of self-destruction in her mind. Suddenly she felt terribly dizzy, sick to her stomach. She wanted to throw up. She wanted to lie down and die. She took five unsteady steps and felt her legs beginning to give way, and she lurched forward, trying to find something to hold on to.

A girl appeared, walking briskly up the path. Laura took another spinning step and started to fall. Blindly she reached out for the strange girl, clutched at her, fell to her knees. She felt the pavement scrape through her nylons.

"Excuse me," she muttered. "Dizzy—so sorry—"

She realized she was on her knees with her arms locked around the legs of the other woman. Confusion shrouded Laura's mind.

"Dizzy," she mumbled again. "Sorry—"

"Here. Let me give you a hand," the girl said, in crisp, clipped New Yorkish tones. Laura felt hands under her arms, lifting her to her feet. She swayed unsteadily, trying to support herself, but the moment the girl removed her hands Laura began to topple again. The girl caught her before she fell, and eased her back to the bench.

"You haven't been drinking," the girl said. "What's the matter? Dizzy spells?"

"I—I don't want to be any trouble—"

"Just let your head hang back, and take it easy. I've got plenty of time. Do you know what's

wrong? Are you pregnant?"

"No—just had a faint feeling," Laura whispered. "So kind of you to help me. Don't want to be any trouble—"

"You look all feverish. Are you sick?"

"I'm—I'm dizzy, that's all. Chills all over." With an effort she brought her head up and looked at her benefactor closely. The other girl was no more than twenty or twenty-one. She was shabbily dressed. Her face was pale and thin, and her dark eyes gleamed with almost unhealthy brightness. Her lipstick was smeared. But she was smiling sympathetically. Laura tried to return the smile. She was so glad that despite all the stories she had heard about New York at least one person was not too busy to help someone in trouble.

Laura said in a choked voice, "My legs just dropped out from under me. I've had a—a very upsetting experience. It sort of stunned me." She began to shiver again.

The other girl looked troubled. "Maybe I can take you home. Where do you live?"

"At the Y," Laura said. "On Fiftieth Street. But I don't want to go there. They'll think I've been drinking. I don't want them to think that. I—I don't know where to go—"

"Let's go to my place," the girl suggested. "It's only a couple of blocks from here. You can lie down until you get your strength back."

"No, please—don't put yourself to any trouble—"

"I can't just leave you here," the girl said. "Come on—give me your arm. Can you walk?"

"I think so."

She leaned on the other girl, who, for all her leanness, was surprisingly strong. They hobbled to the park entrance at Columbus Circle.

"I live on 58th just across Eighth," the girl said. "Come on, now. One step after another and it gets us there."

Somehow Laura found the strength to get across the street, past the endless stream of autos. One step after another. She huddled close to her savior, thinking only that it was wonderful for someone to have come along and help her this way. Sweat bathed her body, and the city around her seemed dreamlike and unreal. *Step. Step. Step. Step.*

"Here we are," the girl said. "I live on the third floor. Lean on me, and up we go."

It was a shabby little building, with a dark, creaky staircase. Clinging to the banister, Laura let herself be dragged upward. *Step. Step. Step.* Rest for a few moments on the landing. *Step. Step.* Rest on the second landing a moment. *Step.* Up the final flight of stairs, down a dark corridor. Pause for a moment in front of a door while the girl gropes for keys. The door opens.

Laura stumbled inside. It was a long, narrow room, with two single beds, a stove, a tiny refrigerator, a little broom-closet of a lavatory. Laura sank down gratefully on one of the beds and kicked her shoes off.

The girl looked down worriedly at her. "How are you feeling?"

"Sick."

"You can stay here as long as you like. My

last roommate is gone, anyway. I like company. I'm Marilyn, by the way. Marilyn Rivers."

"Laura Haynes."

"Let me put up some tea, and then I'll help you out of your clothes. You'll catch pneumonia this way."

Laura lay back, limp, while Marilyn lit the stove and put a kettle up to boil. Then the other girl gently lifted Laura up and slipped her jacket off. "I'll open your bra," Marilyn said. "You'll be more comfortable that way."

Laura made no protest. Marilyn's cool hands slid into Laura's blouse, groped for a moment, unhooked her bra. Laura took a deep breath as the tight garment came loose. A moment later, Marilyn was unzipping Laura's skirt and drawing it off.

"You've got blood on your slip," Marilyn said. "You must be getting your period."

"No," Laura said faintly. "I was raped this afternoon."

"You were *what?*" Marilyn gasped, staring down at her in shock.

"Raped. By a theatrical agent. I was a virgin . . . he made me undress . . ." Laura shivered. The memory was too powerful; she could not recreate the incident.

"You poor kid," Marilyn murmured, shaking her head sadly. "And that's why you're so bombed, eh? The bastard pulled a casting-couch routine. Does it hurt much?"

"Like fire. Fire between my legs."

"Let's get some tea into you, first. Then a good hot bath. After that you can tell me all about it."

Laura watched through slitted eyes as Marilyn poured the tea, and she said nothing as the other girl added a healthy slug of liquor to the cup.

"Sit up a bit," Marilyn said. "Sip it. It'll do you good. I laced it a little."

Laura drank the tea down, slowly. It warmed her, giving her an inner glow that dulled the pain of the rape. After drinking it, she felt strong enough to undress herself while Marilyn drew a hot bath for her. Marilyn helped her into the tub. "You just lie there and relax for a while," Marilyn said. "Your trouble is shock more than anything else." Her eyes roved Laura's body with interest. "You've certainly got a marvelous figure, Laura. You could go places with a body like that."

"That's what I thought," Laura said bitterly, letting the warmth wrap around her. "I was going to break into show business, I thought. And then he made me undress and put on a little costume, and then he told me to take the halter off, and he pulled the briefs off and threw me down on that couch, and there he was on top of me, pushing my legs apart, and—" She shuddered. "It makes me sick just to think about it."

"Talk it out of your system, Laura. Don't try to keep it inside you."

"After it was over, I put my clothes on and ran out of there. I guess I was a little out of my head. I walked up to the park, and I was thinking about killing myself, and then I just started to fold up when you came down the path."

"Lucky thing for you I did," Marilyn said. "In this city they'd just let you lay there half a day.

And then the cops would come pick you up on a vagrancy charge. Are you going to call copper on the clown who forced you?"

"No," Laura said. "I'm afraid to. He's too smart—he'll end up proving it was all my idea, or something."

"That's wise. You can't win with bastards like that. You've just got to try to forget what happened. Laura. You never will, but *try*." Marilyn laughed. "I lost my cherry the same way, you know? Only it wasn't a theatrical agent. It was a juvenile delinquent I went to a party with. He had too much to drink and around midnight he took me home and ripped my panties off and let me have it right in my own back yard. I was fifteen. So I know what you've been through today. I made up my mind, the night he broke my cherry. I said that I wasn't ever going to lay for a man unless he paid me to do it. And I haven't ever done it for free, either."

Laura looked up at her new friend in bewilderment. "You mean—you sell yourself?"

Marilyn shrugged. "In a word, yes. I know, now, you're shocked. Let me tell you something, Laura. Nobody in this city *except* a whore would have picked you up off the ground in the park. I know what it's like to be stepped on, that's why I did it. I know what you're thinking, too. You're thinking that I'm trash, and you're wishing you hadn't let me bring you home."

"No," Laura protested. "That isn't so."

"Sure it is," Marilyn said calmly. "You can't help but think that. Deep down inside you, you know that there are good girls and bad girls, and

that I'm a bad one and you're a good one. I wouldn't be angry if you insisted on clearing out of here right this minute."

"Don't say that," Laura said. "I—I try to judge people by what they do for you, not by what they are. I mean, you helped me. Regardless of anything else, I'm grateful to you, Marilyn."

"But still you wish I weren't what I am."

"You're what you are because of what a man did to you," Laura said vehemently. She rose unsteadily from the tub and reached for the towel Marilyn handed her. "I can't condemn anyone who's suffered what I suffered today. You're the only friend I have in this city. How can I condemn you for anything?"

"Would you like to stay with me?" Marilyn asked. "I told you, I'm looking for a roommate."

"Wouldn't I be in your way?"

"You mean, while I was doing business?" Marilyn smiled wanly. "I never bring customers here. We go to hotel rooms. It's safer all around, that way."

"If it's all right, then—"

"Of course it's all right."

Laura smiled. "I'd like to stay here, then." She handed back the towel. Marilyn gave her a robe, and she put it on, while Marilyn turned down the covers on one of the beds. Laura got in.

"I feel a lot better now," she said.

"You just lie down and rest, anyway," Marilyn told her. "Tomorrow we'll get you moved over from the Y. Do you have much stuff?"

"Just one suitcase."

"Fine. Closet space is a little skimpy here. The rent's fifty-five a month, by the way. Split two ways it isn't bad at all." Marilyn went to the mirror and began to freshen her lipstick. "I usually go out there around two or three in the afternoon, and I come home anywhere from midnight to dawn, depending on how business is. I try to keep away from the late-night tricks, because that's when the cops do most of their picking up. There's some meat in the refrigerator, and soup. You help yourself to anything you want."

"Thanks." Laura said. "Should I wait up for you?"

"You get yourself some rest," Marilyn told her. "Don't worry about me. See you in the morning, in case you're asleep when I get back."

She smiled goodbye and left. Laura sat up in bed, struck by the weirdness of the day. To be raped, then to become the roommate of a prostitute —no one could say she wasn't living an adventurous life! She found it hard to think of Marilyn as a streetwalker, though. She looked so pale and thin, and she was so gentle and sincere. Not at all what Laura had thought whores were like.

She thought about what Marilyn had said. *I made up my mind that I wasn't ever going to lay for a man unless he paid me for it.* So her prostitution, then, was a form of revenge against the male sex. She, too, had been raped of her virginity—and she had devised a way of getting even. Make them pay. Laura could understand that kind of thinking. Right now, she was filled with hatred, not only for McCarten but for all men. For she suspected that,

deep down, they were all the same. Some men actually raped, others only yearned to. But all of them saw women as receptacles for their lusts, not as human beings.

I could become a streetwalker too, Laura thought suddenly. *Instead of going into show business.*

The thought had popped into her mind just as unexpectedly as, earlier, the notion of suicide had. And, though it was just as foreign to the Laura Haynes of yesterday as suicide was, she found herself giving the idea serious consideration now. Stunned at what she was thnking, she put her hands to her face. *What's happening to me? In one day my entire personality is changed. Room with whores, consider becoming one myself—*

But the idea preyed on her, hard as she tried to drive it from her mind. She rose, wandered around the apartment, looking at Marilyn's meager possessions. Cheap dishware, shabby dresses, no reading matter except a frayed little heap of movie magazines and confession stories. Judging from Marilyn's apartment, she did not lead a very pleasant life. Laura felt saddened at the pitiable dinginess of everything.

She picked up one of the confession magazines and began to read it, and the hours passed quickly. Some of the stories were about girls who had been raped, or girls who had gone on the streets. Laura found most of the stories silly, in that they failed to capture the *real* emotion of the victim of a rape, the feeling of desolation, of loss, of sadness. She put the magazines away, finally, and fixed herself a frugal supper.

After eating, she cleaned up, wondering where Marilyn was and what she was doing. She read a while longer, then tuned in some dance music on the radio, and finally, about ten o'clock, got back into bed and turned off the lights.

She found sleep impossible. She closed her eyes and lay perfectly still, hoping for sleep to overtake her, but she remained awake though drowsy. Some time later that night, she was aware of the door opening, of Marilyn tiptoeing in. Marilyn undressed, taking care not to make any noise, and went into the bathroom. Laura heard the water running, and it continued to run for what seemed like half an hour, as though Marilyn were trying to scrub herself absolutely clean of the evening's contamination.

When she came out of the bathroom at last, Laura looked up and said, "How was you evening?"

"You up? I'm sorry if I woke you."

"You didn't. I can't fall asleep."

"Wasn't much of an evening," Marilyn said tiredly. "Four tricks. Twenty bucks."

"What time is it?"

"Half past one." Marilyn sighed. She stood nude in the middle of the floor, hanging up her clothes. Her body was thin and scrawny, with small breasts and flat buttocks. Turning, she said, "I envy you, Laura. If I had a figure like yours I wouldn't be scraping along on five-buck tricks. I'd be a big-league call girl at a hundred bucks a night." She got into bed. "I've got some sleeping pills if you're really having trouble falling asleep."

No, no thanks. Good night, Marilyn."

"Good night," Marilyn said.

CHAPTER THREE

SLEEP FINALLY CAME, what seemed like hours later. When Laura woke, it was only a little past nine. Her head throbbed; her loins were swollen and hurt. Marilyn was still asleep. Laura quietly drew a bath for herself, and spent half an hour soaking in a hot tub.

She felt better after the bath. Marilyn was beginning to stir by the time Laura came out, and she was fully awake by the time Laura was dressed. Marilyn prepared a light breakfast for them, and then they went out. It was a warmer day than yesterday, fresh and clear and springy. The two girls walked down Broadway to Fiftieth, turned west, and headed for the Y.

Laura stopped off at the desk. The matron eyed her suspiciously, because she had been out all night.

"I'm checking out," Laura said. "I've found a roommate, Miss Rivers here."

"Very well," the fat, dowdy woman said coolly. "What time will you be out of your room, Miss Haynes?"

"As soon as I can get packed. Half an hour at the most."

"I'll make up your bill." She turned and snaked a fleshy hand into the row of mailboxes behind the desk. "There was a call for you yesterday afternoon, and another one last night. No one knew where to reach you, so we took down the phone

numbers."

Laura accepted the slip and looked at it in puzzlement. It told her that Mr. McCarten had called at three o'clock, and Mr. Spinelli had called at half past seven. Laura frowned. Why would McCarten phone her? To apologize for his brutality, perhaps. But he didn't seem like the kind who would worry much about apologies. And who was Spinelli? The name meant nothing to Laura, and the phone number, a Plaza one, rang no bells. Shrugging, she filed the paper away in her purse and headed toward the elevator with Marilyn.

"Who were the calls from?" Marilyn asked.

"The guy who made all the trouble for me yesterday, McCarten. And later on somebody named Spinelli called. I don't know any Spinellis."

"Phil Spinelli, maybe?" Marilyn suggested.

"Who's he?"

Marilyn laughed. "Not the sort of fellow you usually find making phonecalls to the YWCA, I'm afraid. He's a big-shot racketeer. Dope, organized vice, stuff like that. Supposed to be a real slick operator."

"Hardly the kind of phone-call I'd expect to get."

"Are you going to call him back?"

"I don't know," Laura said. "I can't imagine who he is or what he wants. For all I know he *is* Phil Spinelli."

"What's so bad about that?"

"Plenty," Laura said. The elevator stopped at her floor, and they got out. "I'm just going to forget all about these phone-calls. That's the safest

thing to do. I'm not looking to get into any more trouble."

It didn't take very long to pack Laura's few belongings and leave. At Marilyn's insistence, they took a taxi for the eight blocks back to her place; the suitcase was heavy, and, Marilyn argued, they could afford to splurge on a fifty-cent taxi ride.

It was almost noon, now. Laura unpacked while Marilyn, sprawled out on the bed, devoured page after page of the movie fan magazines. About one, they had lunch.

"What are you going to do this afternoon?" Marilyn asked.

Laura shrugged. "Look for work, I guess. What else is there to do?"

She had not completely given up the idea of getting into show business. Getting the classified directory, she made a new list of theatrical agents in the neighborhood—taking care to select only those whose listings had display boxes or were in dark type. She wanted nothing more to do with any one-man agencies.

She dressed with care, in her best clothes, a tight skirt that outlined the curves of her hips and buttocks, a clinging blouse against which her breasts jutted like swollen melons. At two o'clock the girls left, Marilyn to take her position near the entrance to Central Park, Laura to make the rounds of the agencies.

It was a discouraging afternoon for Laura.

Her first stop was at an agency whose glossy offices took up an entire floor of a building at Fifth Avenue and Fifty-Fifth Street. An equally glossy

receptionist behind a curved marbled counter asked what Laura wanted and whether she had an appointment. When Laura explained that she was a novice looking for any sort of singing or dancing work, she was practically laughed off Fifth Avenue. "This agency handles only professional talent," she was told curtly. "We don't have any openings for beginners."

It was the same story at the next place, two blocks further down. They demanded to see a list of her credits, and, having none, she had to leave. The third agency, on 49th Street near Sixth, was less brusque; she was called in for an interview, was questioned for about ten minutes, and finally was asked to leave her telephone number. "We'll call you if anything comes up that looks like a promising slot for you," they told her solemnly. "You don't have to bother checking with us at all—we'll get in touch the moment we have anything."

Laura left smiling bitterly. She might be a hick from the sticks, but she was clever enough to see through the Don't-call-us-we'll-call-you routine. It was a smooth way of brushing her off without making enemies. In this business, you never could tell when a raw novice blossomed unexpectedly into an important star, and it didn't pay to do things crudely when you could be tactful about it.

Brushoff number four was a quickie, though. "Sorry, nothing for novices," the receptionist said. At number five, it was the same story, even if she did get another interview first. And at the sixth place on her list, she was told without enthusiasm that interviews were held only on Mondays from

three to four in the afternoon, and that she could come back at that time next week if she cared to.

And then it was five o'clock and doors were beginning to close at offices all over the city. Laura had worked her way down as far as 43rd Street and Seventh Avenue. Rush hour was under way, and the streets were full of people streaming into the subways. A northbound bus passed, crammed to the bursting point. Her legs were aching, but she turned around and began to walk back uptown. The day had grown cold again, and Laura felt tired, chilled, discouraged. McCarten had been right: the other agencies were not looking for beginners. There was a vast oversupply of pretty girls who could sing and dance. Girls just as good-looking as she was, and with a great deal more professional training and experience, were going without work. Only a momentary fancy had aroused McCarten's interest in her.

For a dismal moment she pondered going back to McCarten's office and asking for the job. After all, he had taken something valuable from her; she had every right to demand something in return. And, probably, if he had a job available he would give it to her. He had to have *that* much of a conscience at least, she thought.

But the whole idea was repugnant. She did not want to enter that shabby, cluttered office again. She did not want to have to look into those deep, intense, hungry eyes. She did not, above all, want to be reminded of what McCarten had done to her, or to run the risk of his doing it again. No, she thought. She would not go to McCarten at all, not even as a last resort. If she ever got that desperate,

there would always be other alternatives. Return to Kansas. Suicide. Prostitution. *Anything,* she thought. *Anything would be better than begging that man to do me a favor.*

Wearily she plugged on toward 57th Street. It was half past five by the time she reached the third floor of the dingy little rooming-house. She took out the duplicate key Marilyn had given her that morning and let herself into the little apartment.

She got out of her clothes, hanging them up with care, and filled the bathtub with hot water. For twenty minutes she soaked her aching feet. Getting out, she caught sight of herself in the cracked full-view mirror along the back of the bathroom door.

Marilyn's right, she thought. *With my figure I could go places.*

She admired herself for a moment: the twin peaks of her bosom, high and firm, the nipples small and flawless in their little fields of dark red skin; the flat but yet feminine softness of her belly; the sleek firmness of her thighs; the satiny globes of her buttocks. It was a lush body, a magnificently-endowed body. Nature had been good to her. Her breasts were not scrawny, like Marilyn's, nor did they hang pendulously the way they did on some women. The rose straight upward and outward, needing only the barest minimum of support. Her high cheekbones, strong jaw, and finely sculpted nose gave her face an aristocratic look that belied her farmland birth.

She wondered about the phone-call from the mysterious Mr. Spinelli. Suppose it *was* Phil Spinelli, she

speculated. No matter how a vice king could have found out about her; just suppose. Perhaps he could offer her the wealth and affluence she yearned for. What difference did it make if you got paid $95 a week for letting men look at your body on stage, or $500 a week for letting men slake their desires on your body? Plenty of girls sold themselves for less. Here was poor thin Marilyn, creeping along hoping to turn four or five $5 tricks a night. While a call-girl could claim vast sums, if only she had the sort of sleek, elegant body that a man might pay fabulously to possess.

A body like mine, Laura thought.

She left the bathroom and curled up on the bed with a towel around her body, and gave the matter some hard thought. Oh, she had heard plenty of things from her grandparents about sin, and the pastor had thundered in church every Sunday morning. But Kansas and Kansas morality seemed ten thousand miles away right now. She was in New York. And New York was very different from Kansas.

What do I want out of life? she wondered.

Happiness, she answered herself. And happiness meant mink coats and trips to Paris and lovely clothes and a fine home and a long, shiny limousine. Happiness meant handsome men and dim candlelight and champagne.

Marilyn Rivers wasn't happy. Marilyn was having revenge against men, but it was a petty revenge, a five-dollar-a-trick revenge. How much finer it would be to grow wealthy and soft at the expense of male lust. Why wring $5 from them when other men will pay $500?

Laura laughed. She had all but convinced herself to sign up for the nearest callgirl syndicate, but she had built an entire lacy tower out of nothing at all. Someone named Spinelli had called her. Perhaps he was an encyclopedia salesman; perhaps he wanted to sell her dance lessons. And she had assumed immediately that he was *Phil* Spinelli, the vice overlord, and that he was eager to sign her up for his chain of high-priced girls. *How silly can you get?* Laura asked herself. *When you start building plans out of daydreams, you know you're going too far.*

She opened a few cans and fixed a light dinner for herself. This was a lonely life, she thought, with her roommate out on the streets all afternoon and evening. It meant she would always be eating dinner by herself, spending the evening alone. She was grateful to Marilyn for having taken her in, but, still, she wished she didn't have to stay by herself all evening in this drafty little room. With eight million other people in New York, it was terrible to have only one friend.

After dinner, Laura went down. She strolled around 57th Street, going eastward. There was a concert at Carnegie Hall that night, and Laura paused, watching in envy as the Rolls-Royces and the long black Cadillacs pulled up in front, as the gleaming men and women in their tuxedos and mink wraps got out and disappeared into the concert hall. What a wonderful life it must be, she thought, to be able to drive up to Carnegie Hall and stroll in and take your seat in the row of boxes! Laura had been to only one concert in her life, once on a visit to Topeka, and that had been tremendously exciting. How much

more exciting it must be, she imagined, to sit in Carnegie Hall listening to the New York Philharmonic or the Boston Symphony or one of the other famous orchestras, with famous people sitting all around.

She walked on, down 57th Street, past the fancy store-windows, still lit, with their dazzling displays of china and imported silver and furs and rare books and furniture. Each window was a peephole to an alien universe, for Laura—the universe of money, of elegance, of fine things. She wanted to enter that universe. Suddenly, that night, as she stared into the glowing shops of 57th Street, she felt a powerful thrust of ambition; *I must have these things,* she thought. *Give me a mink coat and a new dress and you couldn't tell me from the prettiest socialite in Carnegie Hall. And I want to be on top! I want to have things!*

She walked down 57th Street as far as Madison Avenue, then turned around and came back along the other side of the street. The concert had started by that time, and the only people in front of Carnegie Hall were a few doormen, a couple of waiting chauffeurs, and a wizened little beggar playing a screechy violin. Laura dropped a dime in his cup, and he thanked her without missing a note.

There you are, she thought. *Some people play in the Philharmonic, others stand outside and cadge dimes. You make your own chances. And if you're lucky, you get into the diamond horseshoe. If you're not, you end up out in the cold, like Marilyn, like this little fiddle-player.*

There was a movie-theater next to the concert hall. It was showing a British comedy; Laura de-

cided it was as good a way of killing time as any, so she went in. The ticket cost $1.80, which was three times as much as it cost to see a double feature back home. She realized, as she paid for the ticket, that she was running low on cash. Her savings, before paying the train fare from Kansas, had amounted to less than a thousand dollars. Now she had only a few hundred left. If she didn't find work soon, she'd be forced to borrow from Marilyn, or to wire home for cash. Neither idea appealed to her.

It was half past eleven when Laura returned home. Marilyn had not yet come in. Laura washed up, got into bed, turned on the lamp, and read, getting deeply absorbed in Marilyn's magazines. At quarter after one Marilyn came in, looking tired and disheveled.

"How'd it go tonight?" Laura asked.

"Five tricks—no, six. Thirty bucks. God, am I tired! You get a job?"

"Not even a nibble," Laura said. Briefly, she told Marilyn how agency after agency had brushed her off with greater or lesser degrees of tact.

"What are you going to do? Keep trying?"

Laura shrugged. "It's like batting my head against a stone wall. I could keep going around to agency after agency and get nowhere."

"You could get some other kind of job."

"What kind? I can't type, I don't know shorthand, I don't know how to operate a switchboard—"

"You could be taught. It doesn't take long to learn how to run a switchboard," Marilyn said, peeling off her clothes and heading for the bathroom. "I bet a lot of companies would be glad to have a

receptionist who looks as good as you do."

"Maybe," Laura said wearily. "I'll give it a try tomorrow."

After breakfast the next day, she left Marilyn and went out to pick up a copy of the *New York Times*. Taking a seat on a bench along the southern border of Central Park, she looked over the *Help Wanted—Female* section of the classified ads.

There were plenty of jobs available, that was certain. But a lot of them required experience of one sort or another—typing, shorthand, professional knowledge. Laura eliminated them at once.

The others were almost all offered through employment agencies, which meant that the first week's salary would go to the agency. And the salaries were nothing fantastic, either. Laura circled some of the ads. *Receptionist-Monitor Board, No Typing, Appearance Important. $65. Gal Friday to Interior Decorator, no exp., Mostly Reception, $70. Personnel Trainees, no exp., attractive type, $75.*

Plenty of jobs—but, probably, plenty of people applying. And the salaries weren't great by any means. The best Laura could find for a trainee or inexperienced girl was $80 to $90 a week. Most of the jobs offered were in the $60-$75 range.

$75 a week was $15 a day, before taxes. Even on her poorest days, Marilyn took in at least that much, and paid no taxes on it. True, it was sordid work, but at least her time would be her own, she could take a day off whenever she pleased, and there was the chance of much greater income on any given day.

No, she thought. *Don't slide straight into whore-*

dom, Laura. Look for a decent job first.

Times in hand, and without much enthusiasm, Laura began to make the rounds of the employment agencies. At the first three she went to, the jobs advertised had already been filled, and dozens of other girls turned away. The fourth place was impressed with her good looks, and sent her across town to apply for a receptionist's job. But three other girls had already been interviewed, and all of them knew how to type. Laura got a "Sorry—we'd like to use you, but the other girls have better qualifications."

The day dragged on. It was the same story everywhere.

Everyone wanted a goodlooking girl on their job. But what they didn't want was an utter greenhorn just fresh from a Kansas farm. They wanted a girl who could type, who knew her way around a switchboard, who was familiar with New York.

Laura didn't qualify.

From agency to agency, interview to interview, until her feet throbbed mercilessly. Twelve o'clock, one o'clock, two o'clock, three. Always other girls applying for the job, and always the other girls were better qualified than she was.

"How about domestic service?" one agency suggested. "Midtown hotel looking for attractive white chambermaids. $42.50 a week plus tips."

"No thanks," Laura said, repressing a shudder. Better no work at all than work like that.

Another place had a page-girl job for her. $52 a week, first week's salary to the agency. In desperation, Laura let herself be sent over for an interview, but the personnel manager turned her down. "You're

too imposing for the job, dear. What we have in mind is a high-school type, not a glamor queen. Sorry."

Sorry.

Sorry.

Sorry.

Everyone apologized. McCarten was sorry; the theatrical agencies on Fifth Avenue were sorry; the employment agencies were sorry; personnel managers were sorry.

You couldn't eat sorrow. You couldn't spend it. You couldn't even feel happy about it. Everyone was sorry, and you were sorry too.

At half past five Laura gave up, dumped the *Times* in an ashcan, and headed home. It had been another wasted day. Her legs hurt fiercely, she was hollow inside, and she had accomplished nothing.

In the apartment, she stared at herself in the mirror. Her loins no longer ached from the rape, and she told herself that she was starting to forget about it. She was no longer a virgin; what of it? She looked no different. Her face had not changed. She looked tired, now, but otherwise there was no difference. A man's body had entered her body and had withdrawn. She was a woman now instead of a girl. But the fact made no difference. No difference at all, except that now she no longer had to worry about guarding that meaningless thing, her virginity.

She fixed dinner. Afterward, while waiting for Marilyn to come home, she considered the alternatives.

Suicide was silly, a coward's way out. And going back to Kansas was an admission of utter defeat.

What else was there? Calling McCarten? That

was defeat, too. Taking one of the $42.50 jobs? That was worse than defeat; it was humiliation. Going to secretarial school? A waste of time, she thought. She would have to study for six or ten weeks to become qualified to take a miserable $60-a-week job. You didn't get to wear minks on $60 a week. You didn't sit in a box at Carnegie Hall.

With your body, you can go places, Marilyn had said. *Well, why not? Why not?*

Why not?

Marilyn came home at two o'clock, with earnings of thirty-five dollars. Laura was still up.

"You get a job?" Marilyn asked.

"Nope."

"Not even a near miss?"

"There wasn't anything," Laura said. She smiled. "I'm not licked, though. I've made up my mind about what I'm going to do. And you can help me, if you want to."

"Just tell me what I have to do, honey, and I'll help you every bit I can."

Laura's smile was bitter. "I've decided to go on the street, Marilyn. Teach me how to be a whore."

CHAPTER FOUR

THE HOTEL WAS ON 56TH STREET just off Seventh Avenue. It had obviously seen better days. It was a big massive nineteenth-century structure, with gargoyles and everything. But the marquee was stained and tattered, and no doorman waited in front. Laura walked in. It was just as Marilyn had described it: a dump. Even the potted palms were drooping and frayed. The lights were dim, sputtering fluorescents. A couple of sloppy-looking bellhops lounged near the elevator. The desk clerk had a copy of the *Daily Mirror* spread out in front of him, and he was doing the crossword puzzle.

Laura felt a tight band of fear across her belly. She remembered with tension what Marilyn had told her in explaining the pitch. *Hotels don't like to rent rooms to unescorted girls without luggage, because they know that nine times out of nine and a half the girl is a prostie. They'll rent to you, but if you don't grease them up they'll give you a hard time first.*

She moistened her lips as she waited for the desk clerk to look up from his crossword puzzle. He stared at her out of faded, red-rimmed eyes.

"Yes?"

"I'm looking for a room," she said. She opened her hand and let the crumpled five-dollar bill tumble out. It landed on the open newspaper. Casually, the desk clerk covered it with his palm, smiling faintly.

"A single?" he asked.

"That's right. For—for tonight."

She waited hesitantly. The fiver was out of sight, now. All the clerk had to do was shake his head and say the hotel was filled up, and he was five bucks ahead for not very much effort. Laura added after a moment, "I'm a friend of Mary Ryan." That was the name Marilyn used when she signed the register here; Marilyn had told her to mention it to the clerk.

The clerk nodded. "Okay. We've got a room. Three-fifty okay?"

"Fine," Laura said in a choked voice. *Now I'm in business,* she thought.

"We usually prefer it in advance when the party doesn't have any luggage," said the desk clerk blandly. "Do you want to see the room first?"

"That's all right. I'll take it anyway."

"As you wish, ma'am. Would you sign here?"

He shoved the register toward her. Laura signed in as Lois Harper, giving a fictitious Brooklyn address. Then she counted out three singles and two quarters, and shoved them across the counter. The clerk scribbled a receipt for her and handed her the key.

"Room 804," he said. "The bellhop will take you up if you want a look."

"Thanks," Laura said. She took the key and walked toward the elevator. The bellhop, a boy of about eighteen, got in and clanged the wire cage shut. Creakily, the elevator began to ascend.

"You're new, aren't you?" the bellhop said.

"I don't know what you mean."

"I mean, you've never been around here before. We don't get classy ones like you, much."

Laura's face reddened. She looked at the floor.

"Just show me to my room," she said.

The elevator halted jerkily on the eighth floor. The bellhop led her down the dark corridor, with its threadbare carpeting, to a room near the end of the hall. Taking the key from her, he opened the door. She followed him in. Grinning, he put his arms around her and tried to kiss her. Laura's first impulse was to slap him. But more advice of Marilyn's came to mind. *The bellhop will probably fool around. They always try to grab a free feel. Let them have it, because otherwise they could make big trouble for you. A nasty bellhop could tip off the cops and get you raided. But don't let them get more from you than a feel, Laura. You start giving out tricks on the house and pretty soon you're everybody's doormat.*

She let the bellboy kiss her and squeeze her breasts. He pressed his body against hers, until she quickly eased away.

"That's enough," she said.

"Let's have some fun, baby!"

"You've had all I plan to give," she said. She nudged him toward the door. He left reluctantly but without putting up much of a fuss, as though it was all part of the rules for the bellhop to do a little smooching but then to leave.

Laura surveyed the room.

It was not much. There was a wide bed—one of the reasons Marilyn preferred this hotel was that the single rooms came with wide beds—and half a dozen clean towels were draped over the iron bedstead. There was a rickety dresser, a yellowing mirror, an ugly lamp, a small table. The room had its own sink and toilet bowl, but no bath or shower. Instead

of venetian blinds, there was a greasy-looking windowshade. The room was painted a depressing dull green, and didn't seem to have been painted within the last ten years. It was a cheerless, bleak room. But it only cost $3.50 a night.

Laura locked up and rode downstairs, and walked briskly back to Central Park South. According to Marilyn, the block running along the bottom of Central Park, 59th Street between Columbus Circle and Fifth Avenue, was one of the best places in the city for streetwalkers. Usually the cops didn't bother you, especially if you were well dressed and quiet, and since it was the street bordering a park you didn't run the risk of being complained about by shopkeepers whose storefronts you might be sullying. Marilyn had told her, *If a cop comes over and starts trouble, just say you're waiting for your boyfriend. Stick around another ten minutes, then walk away. They can't arrest you unless they actually catch you in the act. Loitering isn't enough to stand up in court. They have to follow you to your hotel room and break in on you and the john you've picked up.*

Marilyn's area was near the Columbus Circle entrance to the park. At her advice, Laura moved further east, on the other side of Sixth Avenue. That way they wouldn't be competing with each other, and, besides, more high-money men were likely to come walking from east to west along 59th than from west to east.

There was no sign of Marilyn. Laura wondered if she had a client. She walked past Marilyn's post, heading toward Sixth Avenue. The time was ten minutes to three; the weather was warm, the sky very

blue. Laura leaned up against the low wall that rimmed the park, and began to wait.

Marilyn had been a little surprised, the night before, when Laura had announced her decision. At first she had tried to discourage Laura from sharing her profession; then, seeing that Laura was determined to go on the streets at least once, Marilyn had set about to instruct her. They had been up half the night, the teacher and the willing pupil, as Marilyn poured out all the benefits of her three years' experience.

Laura's heart raced furiously now. *If they only could know about me now back in Kansas,* she thought. *They'd have fits if they knew what line of work pure and lovely Laura Haynes has gone into.*

Although she was not fond of smoking, she lit a cigarette now to mask her nervousness. She was dressed in her smartest clothes—a tan trenchcoat over a tight cashmere sweater and a crisp skirt. She had the trenchcoat dangle loosely from her shoulders, revealing the eye-opening thrust of her bosom and the trim lines of her waist and hips. To a casual passer-by, she might have been some Fifth Avenue beauty waiting for her beau.

Twenty minutes went by. A number of men looked at her with keen interest, but moved on without stopping to speak to her. *Maybe I'm too chic to look like a streetwalker,* she thought. *Most of them have a kind of bedraggled look that tells a man they're available. But maybe men are afraid they'll get slapped in the face if they try to proposition me.*

When it was nearly four o'clock, and she had been on her territory almost an hour without any

sign of a client, she came close to giving the whole thing up. She told herself, though, that Marilyn spent nine or ten hours a day to find four or five clients; presumably a girl as attractive as Laura would do better business, but, still, she hadn't expected to be ignored this long. She felt ambivalent about the situation: she wanted to be picked up, yet at the same time she wanted *not* to be picked up. She would have preferred to retain her virtue. On the other hand, she had already spent $3.50 in rent and $5 in bribery to get a hotel room. Marilyn had told her to charge $10, but, even if she got a client at that rate, she would have only $1.50 to show for her first encounter. With a fixed overhead of $8 or $10 a day for a hotel room, it was necessary to have several clients, at least, to come out ahead.

Laura went tense. One man, who had already gone past her twice, was coming back a third time—and now he was walking toward her! He had come from the Fifth Avenue direction, had eyed her carefully, and had gone on walking toward Columbus Circle. Then, a few moments later, he had returned, as though for a second look. He had gone on to Fifth, again. And now he was back, and cutting away from the sidewalk to walk over to her.

Her heart thundered. *Don't freeze up,* she thought. *Don't muff it.*

He was about forty, she thought, and well-dressed. Of middle height, no hat, balding slightly, dark clipped mustache. Not bad-looking. Slightly heavy-set. A big ring on the middle finger of his left hand.

He was holding out an unlit cigarette. In a sauve

voice he said, "Pardon me, Miss. My lighter doesn't seem to be working. Could I trouble you for a light?"

"No trouble at all," Laura said, making her voice husky. She stood up, opened her handbag, took out a matchbook, struck one for him. He puffed busily for a moment.

"Thanks," he said, when the cigarette was lit. He hesitated a moment, as though still trying to size her up. She wondered numbly whether it would all fizzle, whether he would now puff on his cigarette and stroll away. But he said at length, "Maybe you could do me one more favor. I'm looking for some congenial companionship for the next half hour or so. Are you free, or are you waiting for somebody here?"

"I'm waiting," Laura said, as Marilyn had instructed her. "But it doesn't look like the fellow is going to show up, so to the deuce with him." She smiled warmly. "My name's Lois. I've got a place a couple of blocks from here, if that's what you're interested in."

He smiled. The formalities were over. It was a straight business transaction now. "Interested? Yes. I'd say I was. Depends, though, on what it's likely to cost me."

"Ten," she said.

"For the next half hour?"

"That's right. Without any specialties." The cold words rolled glibly off her tongue.

He eyed her, looking her over from head to toe. "Ten is a little higher than some charge, Lois."

She smiled urbanely. "Ten is the price."

He hesitated only a moment. "Okay. Ten it is. Take me to your love-nest."

She took the arm that he extended, and they began to walk toward Seventh Avenue. Laura was so nervous she nearly tripped on her high heels. Even though she had rehearsed her little speech all morning, she was surprised that she had carried it off so coolly. She was surprised, too, at the way the conversation had changed from casual interchange to a seamy negotiation, almost of its own accord.

They crossed 59th and headed down Seventh Avenue toward the hotel. They chatted about the weather. Laura kept up a steady flow of light talk. Marilyn's advice went round and round in her head. *Never try to find out anything about them. They'll think you're prying, and anyway you don't need to know. Always collect from them in advance. Always let them know that you're taking them for a single trick, and make sure they know that specialty items command a higher price. And once you get your clothes off, get it over with as quick as you can. The faster you can get back out on the street, the sooner you'll be turning your next trick.*

They reached the hotel. The desk clerk did not look up as Laura and her "friend" walked past him. The bellhop on duty was a different one from the one who had brought Laura to her room before. He kept complete decorum as he ushered them into the elevator.

The client seemed a little surprised at the shabbiness of the hotel, but he said nothing. The elevator stopped at eight. Laura led him down the hall to the room, and opened the door. As she stepped inside, seeing in one glance the towels on the iron bedstead, the little nightstand, the dingy walls, she had a sen-

sation very much like vertigo. She knew that she was standing on the brink, and the moment she let this man into the room with her and closed the door she would begin the long descent into the abyss.

She closed the door and flipped the catch on the lock, as Marilyn had specified. Now not even a management key could open the door.

She switched on the light and smiled bravely at the man. "I'd like the fee now, please. You can put it on the dresser."

"Right."

He slipped a bill out of his wallet while Laura undressed. Marilyn's words again were in her mind: *If they look well-heeled, peel to the buff. You may get a little extra that way. Otherwise don't bother. Get back on the street as fast as you can.*

She draped her coat over a chair, unzipped her skirt, and stepped out of it. She peeled the tight sweater off next. After just an instant of hesitation, she unsnapped her bra. She heard her client's sharp little indrawn hiss of pleasure and surprise as he saw that the full, ripe mounds of her breasts were all genuine. She removed her half-slip next, and rolled her panties down over her hips. Now she wore nothing but garter-belt and stockings. She tried to be casual about her nudity. As she motioned to remove the stockings, he said in a strained voice, "Leave them on, please. I rather like it that way."

He had removed his jacket and his trousers. She took a quick look at his body. His legs were hairy, and surprisingly lean, considering the stockiness of his upper body.

Make sure they wear protection, Marilyn had

warned. Marilyn had given her a little packet just in case, but the client had provided his own, Laura saw.

She mounted the bed, lying on her back looking up at the ceiling.

God help me, she thought. *There's no turning back now.*

She felt his weight above her. His hands touched her breasts, squeezing them gently, toying with the stiff little nipples. He made no attempt to kiss her. He roamed her body with his fingers, and she felt herself warming under his touch. He didn't seem to be in any hurry. *Some of them may try to be regular romeos,* had been Marilyn's warning. *Don't let them spend hours on preliminaries. Get yourself ready, and do it. You're in this for cash, not for kicks.*

She locked her legs around him, and he responded, and their bodies joined. She closed her eyes and began to move rhythmically. It had not been painful, as it had been with McCarten. She felt a faint sensuous stirring in the pit of her stomach, and wished dimly, sadly, that she could be doing this out of love and not out of callous cynicism. Every movement brought a soft tingling of pleasure. She realized that she could almost be enjoying what she was doing.

But Marilyn had warned her to bring matters to a swift culmination. Laura began to gasp, counterfeiting the crisis of passion. Sweat broke out all over her, and she closed her eyes tightly, continuing to thrust her body, and suddenly she cried out in counterfeit ecstacy and the man shuddered and gave a little moan, and his body shook convulsively and it

was all over.

He did not want to get up, or even to leave her body. She waited a minute, then said, "It's all over."

"Okay. Okay."

"You can stay another round, if you like," she told him. "Same price." *Always be a good salesman,* Marilyn said.

"No," he muttered, getting up from her. "I'll leave now." The sauveness seemed to be gone. His lust satisfied, he hardly looked at her. He took one of the towels and washed himself, and then, quickly, he dressed. He was in a hurry now.

Laura remained on the bed, watching his hasty exit. *He got what he came for,* she thought. *Now he wants to scram before the hotel gets raided.*

He muttered a goodbye and tried to open the door. But he had trouble with the catch; Laura had to get up and let him out. He paused before going, taking one last look at the ripe glory of her breasts and buttocks, and then he was gone. Laura shut the door behind him and locked it.

There was a ten-dollar bill on the dresser. She put it in her billfold. Her watch said twenty minutes to five. So she had given him a little over half an hour, and now she had a profit on the day of $1.50, with hours still to go. Wearily, she walked over to the mirror. *Take a good look,* she thought. *Take a look at the face of a whore, Laura.*

She felt tired and embittered. There was a dull ache in her loins, the throb of unfulfilled desire. Marilyn had warned her of that. The men got you all worked up, but there was no satisfaction.

She went over to the sink and washed herself

carefully, and then she got dressed. In the dim light of the lamp, the room was unimaginably gloomy. She felt terribly depressed. The transaction was completed. She had sold herself to a middle-aged stranger; he had ploughed his furrow and had paid and was gone.

She pulled the bra cups over her breasts and fastened the snap. *Is this what I want?* she asked. *An ugly hotel room and a few minutes of sweaty grunting? I can do better than this. I don't have to depend on five or ten bucks a lay. As long as I'm selling myself, I ought to get a good price for the merchandise.*

Dressed, she locked the door and rang for the elevator. *This is minor-league stuff,* she thought. *But it's valuable experience. I ought to be able to better myself soon, when I've been around a little more.*

The committment was made. She felt neither joyous nor sad about it. This was her life, now—and, if she played her cards right, she would wind up living a plush life. Everyone has to start at the bottom.

Outside, it was growing dark rapidly. Laura walked at a brisk pace back to her post near Sixth Avenue, and waited for the next customer to come along.

CHAPTER FIVE

LAURA TURNED HER SECOND TRICK about forty minutes later. He was a tall, sharp-faced man in his late thirties, who talked with a pronounced Southern drawl and seemed very embarrassed about the whole thing. After him, business slowed down. At quarter to seven she went into a cafe opposite the Coliseum and had a quick supper. By twenty after, she was back on her post again. It was getting quite chilly, now. Marilyn had said that the outdoor work was done only in the spring and summer and early fall; the rest of the year, they hung out in the many bars in the neighborhood. Bar work was easier in many ways, but also less profitable, since you usually had to give the bartender or proprietor a cut of your takings if you wanted to be allowed to solicit on his premises.

Trick number three turned up at half past eight—a short, roundbottomed man of perhaps forty-five. He had a strong body odor, and he seemed more interested in playing with Laura's breasts than in making love with her, but she finally managed to get rid of him. Now she had taken in thirty dollars; she was $21.50 ahead on the day, after about five hours' work. She decided to quit after one more trick, since it was getting cold.

The trick came along. Jovial, well-dressed, fairly high. He wanted to take Laura for a few drinks first, but she kept her mind on business instead. When he asked about the price, she upped it to

fifteen, figuring she could always let herself be bargained-down. He looked like a free spender, though, and he was. Fifteen was okay with him. They went to the hotel.

At quarter to ten, Laura returned to the little room she shared with Marilyn. She felt tired and filthy all over; the sweat of four men had mingled with her own, and four men's bodies had pressed down heavily on hers. She took her jacket off, stripped off her clothes quickly. Every square inch of her body seemed to itch. She went into the bathroom and turned the hot water on. She wished Marilyn had a shower. She wanted to have the hot water cascading down on her from above, washing away the day's physical contact.

But there was no shower, only the tub. She ran the water in, as hot as she could stand it, and scrubbed hard, until her skin gleamed. She knew now why Marilyn always spent an hour in the tub after coming home from a day's work. It wasn't to prevent picking up any disease as much as it was to wash away the touch of the men who had bought her body that day.

When she was through soaking, she towelled herself vigorously dry. She felt cleaner, but there was still a residue of discomfort.

Maybe you never can wash the feeling away, she thought. *Not even if you take a bath in concentrated sulphuric acid. It stays with you, soaking into your bones, and you can't ever get rid of it.*

And there was the dull throbbing of frustration in her loins, too, the cost of being sexually aroused four times without a single fulfillment. She

felt the discomfort up through her entire body. Her nipples were hard and painful. Her thighs ached.

She finished drying off and went into the bedroom, planning to read for a while and then perhaps doze off until Marilyn came home. But she was surprised to find the door opening, and Marilyn coming in. Marilyn had a paper bag under one arm.

"You're back early," Laura said. "It isn't even eleven o'clock yet."

"I know. But I figured you'd come in by now, and I wanted to get back here and spend some time with you. What sort of day did you have?"

"Four tricks," Laura said with a touch of pride. "Three tens and a fifteen."

"Wow! You take to it like a natural."

"Thanks," Laura said ironically. "How'd you manage today?"

Marilyn shrugged. "Four tricks. Twenty bucks. If I had your figure, I could charge ten and get away with it. But I don't, so I can't. How do you feel?"

"Okay, I suppose."

"I mean, you aren't all keyed up? They heat you up, and then they don't finish what they've started, and it leaves you all lousy inside. Or didn't that happen to you?"

"It did," Laura said. "I took a hot bath, but it didn't help much."

"There are ways of helping it," Marilyn said. "Let me get washed up and I'll show you." She began to get out of her clothes.

"What's in the paper bag?" Laura asked. "Groceries?"

"Sort of," Marilyn laughed. "Take a look."

Laura opened the bag. Inside was a fifth of Scotch. "Whiskey!" she said.

"I figured we'd have a little party. To sort of celebrate your debut. It's a kind of special occasion, after all."

Marilyn finished undressing and went into the bathroom, leaving the door open. While she bathed, she bombarded Laura with questions about the way her day had gone. She wanted to know what sort of johns she had picked up, whether they had given her any trouble, whether the hotel people had been sassy, whether there had been any kind of interference from the police. Laura found that talking about the day in this manner eased some of the festering guilt within her. It reduced the whole day's activities to a mere professional level. They could just as well be two secretaries or two receptionists talking shop.

Pink and glowing, Marilyn came out of the bathroom and opened the Scotch. "How do you want yours, honey? On the rocks, neat, or with mix?"

"Mixed, I guess."

"There's ginger ale in the fridge. Dig it out while I'm opening the bottle. Get the icecube tray too, while you're at it."

Laura complied. When she had finally succeeded in wrestling the frozen-in icecube tray out of the miniature frigidaire, she saw that Marilyn had already poured healthy quantities of liquor into two drinking-glasses. Almost a third of each glass was filled with whiskey. Marilyn added two icecubes to

each drink, and filled Laura's the rest of the way with ginger ale. She drank her own on the rocks.

"Cheers," Marilyn said.

Laura smiled. "Cheers."

They clinked glasses gravely and drank. Laura had never been much of a drinker, and when she did have anything it was usually bourbon-and-water, sometimes rye-and-ginger. Scotch was new to her. But she liked the flavor, and she particularly liked the immediate warmth in her throat and in the pit of her stomach.

"It was awfully good of you to think of picking up a bottle," Laura said. "I was getting kind of blue, here all by myself."

Marilyn nodded. "It's always a little rough, after you've finished your first day on the street. That's why I knocked off early. To keep you company here."

Laura found the drink slipping smoothly down her throat. In no time at all, nothing but half-melted ice cubes remained in her glass. Marilyn caught up with her in two quick gulps and poured refills.

"Not much for me," Laura said. "I'm getting dizzy, I think."

"What of it? Come on—you only live once."

But Laura *was* getting dizzy, very dizzy. She drank the second drink cautiously. Even so, her head began to buzz a little, and her eyes would not focus. She leaned back, letting her gown dangle loosely open, and a glassy smile appeared on her face. So this was what it was like to be drunk, she thought. It was fun.

She was vaguely aware that Laura was filling her glass again. She tried to protest, but the only words that came past her lips were thick, fuzzy things that probably were unintelligible. Automatically, she lifted the third drink to her lips. She could make out Marilyn's face smiling across the table at her, blurred and badly out of focus.

"Want another?" Marilyn asked some time later.

"No . . . no, please. I want to go to bed."

"Sure, baby. Sure." Laura stood up and staggered uncertainly, almost falling. But Marilyn was right next to her, her arm around Laura's shoulder, and with the strength that seemed so strange in her thin, wiry body Marilyn managed to hold her up, to carry her across the room and put her gently down on top of her bed.

"Let's get the robe off you," Marilyn said. "Easy, now. Just lift your shoulder."

Laura complied, and Marilyn took off the robe. Laura saw Marilyn remove her own robe. And then, to Laura's surprise, Marilyn lay down naked, not in her own bed, but on Laura's. The two girls were naked, side by side. Laura frowned, not knowing what to say.

Marilyn murmured, "I'm going to make you feel real good now, honey. I'm going to help you relax and get a good night's sleep."

"What—whatcha gonna do—"

"Just relax, Laura, just relax." Marilyn's hand was cupping Laura's breasts. It was almost like a man's hand, Laura thought, nothing soft and feminine about it. She lay on her side, facing Marilyn, and the other girl had her hands on both of Laura's

breasts, playing now with the nipples, now squeezing the entire heavy globes with all five fingers. One of Marilyn's thin knees gently pushed its way between Laura's thighs. Laura found it was pleasant to have the leg between hers. She began to move rhythmically, deriving pleasure from each rubbing motion of her loins over Marilyn's skin.

Then Marilyn released Laura's breasts and began to move her hands over every part of Laura's body. Laura smiled. She saw nothing unnatural in one woman making love to another, at that point. It was simply that all day both of them had been denied fulfillment, and now, alone with each other, they could give each other the pleasure that their clients had denied them all day.

Laura's lips gently caressed Marilyn's stiff nipples, and her hands wandered toward the other girl's lean, muscular buttocks. She wriggled closer to Marilyn, and the two girls embraced, and Laura could feel the jutting little bones of Marilyn's hips pressing into the softness of her own thighs.

Laura began to pant as Marilyn's hands touched the secret places of her body, stimulating them, exciting them. She reached out for Marilyn, wanting to do the same.

"Kiss me," Laura muttered harshly. "Kiss me *there.*"

Marilyn kissed her. "Now you kiss me," Marilyn whispered. Laura did. "Again," Marilyn said. "Oh, again, again!"

And then neither of them could control themselves any longer, and they came together in a tight embrace.

After the long hours of standing in the street, all the moments of sweaty exertion beneath the sagging bodies of strange men—all forgotten now, all blurred by the sweet haze of alcohol and the warmth of Marilyn's lean body above hers.

Laura felt her heart pound as though it would rip out of her chest. Every muscle contracted; she gasped harshly for breath and cried out, "Oh oh *oh!*" and at the same moment above her Marilyn emitted a low moaning sound, and then it was finished, and Marilyn clung limply to Laura like something washed up by the tide, and the two women rested, letting the fierce tides of passion ebb slowly away.

The ache in the loins was gone, now, Laura thought. The day's frustrations were wiped out.

The very strenuouness of the act had sobered her, had burned the excess alcohol from her brain, and now, as she lay with all passion spent, Marilyn's warm flushed body against hers, she reflected that what they had done was unnatural, a strange act.

But *was* it so unnatural, really, she asked herself?

They were friends. They shared a mutual need for fulfillment. Because of their profession, they could not get that fulfillment from men. What more natural thing in the world was there but for them to give that fulfillment to each other?

She opened her eyes. Marilyn, smiling, looked into them.

"Hello, darling."

"Hello, Marilyn."

"How do you feel now?"

"Wonderful."

"No guilt about it?"

Laura shrugged. "I don't know. It was like all my troubles being washed away in one second."

"You've never done anything like this before, have you?" Marilyn asked. "I mean, with another woman."

"No. Never."

"Then I was the first. That makes me very happy."

"Do you—have you done much of this?" Laura asked.

"Partically since I went on the street. It's the only way I can get any kicks. I pretend the men excite me, but it's never happened, never once in my life with a man. Only with women."

Laura closed her eyes. "I feel very sleepy now. Warm and drowsy and happy."

"That's the way you should feel, honey. Let's get some sleep, now. See you in the morning."

Marilyn's lips gently grazed Laura's. Laura smiled.

"Goodnight, Marilyn."

"Goodnight, honey."

Laura nestled under the covers, against her pillow. The lights went out, and a moment later she heard Marilyn getting into her bed. Laura yawned.

She understood now why Marilyn had been so eager for her as a roommate. It was more than sheer generosity, more than mere loneliness. Marilyn had been looking for a lover. Laura frowned. She was not sure she wanted to settle down this way as a regular habit. Walking the streets all day for twenty-five or thirty dollars, then coming home and drink-

ing and making love with another woman . . .

Yet a routine it became, at least for the next three or four days. In the morning, the girls read, slept, shopped for food. Marilyn had a bank account with several thousand dollars in it, and she persuaded Laura to open one as well, and to bank as much of her earnings as she possibly could, as an emergency fund against illness or pregnancy. In mid-afternoon, they would go out together to take their positions near the park. Then, at whatever time they decided to call it a day, they would return to the apartment. Usually Laura got back first, since she demanded a higher rate and was more popular with the passers-by. She would return by eleven and bathe and set up the drinks; by midnight Marilyn would come in, and after she had tidied herself up they would have a little party and then go to bed.

The lovemaking invariably satisfied them both. Laura felt secret pangs of guilt at these lesbian practices, but she said nothing about them to Marilyn. She did not like the idea of making love with another woman, but on the other hand there was always the ache of frustration in her loins at the end of the day, and after a couple of drinks her inhibitions disappeared.

Then, on the fourth day, Marilyn said apropos of nothing at all, "Hey, did you ever call that Spinelli fellow back?"

Laura frowned. "Why, no. I forgot all about it."

"You dope, why'd you do that?"

"I didn't know any Spinellis."

Marilyn glowered scornfully. "Suppose it was

Phil Spinelli, though? Maybe he saw you somewhere, and wants to line you up for his syndicate."

Laura shook her head. "Don't be silly. There are dozens of Spinellis in New York, and Phil Spinelli doesn't know me from Eve. Besides, it was probably a mistake, a call for some other girl on my floor. There were two or three girls with Italian names—"

"Does it cost you very much to call him?"

"No, but I feel funny, calling a strange number and asking to speak to someone I don't even know—"

"Just suppose it *is* the bigshot, though!" Marilyn urged. "Christ almighty, Laura, do you want to spend the rest of your life selling your ass at ten bucks a throw? A girl with your figure could be making a mint. I tell you in all truth, I never seen a pair of buttons like yours on *any* woman in the trade. So you live up here wasting yourself on me and on a bunch of cheap ten-buck johns, when you might be a big syndicate girl—"

"But how could it be—"

"*Call* him," Marilyn insisted. "You never know. Don't sell yourself short."

In the end, Marilyn won out. It was unreasonable not to try, at least. Laura had some trouble finding the scrap of paper on which the number was written, and for a moment she thought she might have thrown it out. But at last it turned up, crumpled into a corner of her handbag. She flattened it out.

"Maybe it's too early to call," Laura suggested hesitantly.

"It's eleven in the morning, goof. If he isn't there, you can leave your number or something."

She had run out of excuses. She went to the

phone and dialed the number. On the third ring the phone was picked up, and a deep masculine voice boomed, "Yeah?"

"Mr. Spinelli?" Laura said weakly.

"Who's this?"

"My name is Laura Haynes. I got a message about a week ago from Mr. Spinelli telling me that he had called, but I lost the number and it just turned up. Are you Mr. Spinelli?""

"No. What did you say your name was?"

"Haynes. Laura Haynes."

"Hold on, huh?"

Laura held on. She heard muffled sounds, as though someone's hand were over the mouthpiece while a discussion went on.

"What's happening?" Marilyn asked.

"They're bringing Spinelli to the phone, I guess," Laura said. Her heart pounded.

A different voice—smooth, almost oily—said. "Miss Haynes?"

"That's right."

"I was wondering why it took you so long to get in touch with me, Miss Haynes. I was very anxious to hear from you."

"Oh?"

"Yes. You've been recommended most highly to me, Miss Haynes. Do you mind if I call you Laura? And you can call me Phil. I like my friends to call me by my first name."

Laura nearly dropped the phone. Nodding frantically to the puzzled Marilyn, Laura said, "Ah—yes. *Phil.*"

"That's better. Are you free this afternoon for

lunch, Laura?"

" I—could be. But this is all so mysterious—"

"I'm sorry. But I have a business proposal for you, and it's not something that can easily be explained over the phone. Shall we make it a date for lunch in, say an hour and a half?"

CHAPTER SIX

"I'LL BE DAMNED," LAURA MUTTERED in quiet incredulity, as she hung up the phone. "So you were right after all. It was Phil Spinelli! But how—where would he find out about me?—"

"They say he knows everything about everyone, honey. Aren't you glad you listened to me and called him, now? Christ, I wish *I* could get into his syndicate! If I only had your looks—then I wouldn't need to tramp around in the cold for five bucks a trick." Marilyn shrugged. "Well, this is your big break. What kind of arrangements did you make with him?"

"He's picking me up here at half past twelve."

"*Here?* Baby, you better be ready ahead of time, and wait for him out in front."

"Why?"

"Because we don't want Phil Spinelli to know that you live in a dump like this. His girls have to radiate class, poise, breeding. Which means you've got to give him the impression right from the start that you come from the proper side of the tracks."

"Oh, dear—"

"Don't worry about it," Marilyn snapped. "Just start getting ready. And dress like you're having a date with the Duke of Windsor."

Laura put on her one cocktail dress, a tight blue affair with a scoop neckline that left bare the creamy upper globes of her breasts. At Marilyn's suggestion, she put just a dab of perfume in the hollow between her breasts, and wore a tiny jewelled locket that lay

tantalizingly over the soft, high hills of flesh. She combed her long auburn hair out and arranged a meticulous coiffure. She brushed her teeth until they sparkled like pearls. By the time she was finished, she glistened. No one could possibly tell, merely by looking at her, that only the day before she had taken part in five squalid acts of physical lust in a cheap hotel room with flyspecked walls. She looked more like a radiant Bryn Mawr senior on her way to meet her fiance. Marilyn nodded in approval when Laura turned away from the mirror at last.

"Tremendous," she enthused. "You'll knock him for a loop. You've got just what they want—a virginal appearance without the virginity that goes with it."

"What sort of man is he, do you know?"

Marilyn shrugged. "All I know is that he's supposed to be a smooth operator with lots of dough. Also that he doesn't like to waste time."

"Do you think he'll want me for—for his syndicate?"

"You bet. And you know what *that* means. He'll put you up in a plush apartment somewhere on the East Side, and every afternoon you'll get a phone-call telling you where your assignment for the night is, and you go off to some fancy party or some millionaire's hotel suite and you earn yourself a hundred bucks."

Laura shook her head. "But why will men pay so much just for a night in bed with a woman?"

"For one thing, because they can afford it. For another, because it saves them a lot of fuss and bother. Look at it this way: Phil Spinelli's girls aren't cheap whores. They're beautiful society dames of the

sort every man wants to lay. But to lay a regular society woman, you've got to date her for weeks, take her to fancy restaurants, spend a lot of cash and time on her before she'll come across. With a call girl, you short-circuit all the steps in between. You pick up the phone, you call Spinelli, and you get a nice glossy Fifth Avenue type girl who doesn't need to be coaxed into bed." Marilyn glanced at her watch. "But it's almost half past twelve. You all ready?"

"Yes."

"Get downstairs, then. You don't want Spinelli to have to come looking for you up here."

"Okay. I'm going."

"And—" Marilyn smiled tenderly and squeezed Laura's gloved hand. "Good luck, honey. I hope you make the grade—even if that means we have to split up."

"We'll stay together, no matter what," Laura promised.

Marilyn shook her head. "It won't work out that way, believe me. But thanks for saying it. Hurry along, now, honey."

Laura made her way downstairs, trying to remain calm. She had only a few moments to wait in front of the building before an enormous black Imperial sedan glided up. A chauffeur hopped out and opened the back door, and a man emerged. He looked around uncertainly for a moment before spotting Laura.

"Mr. Spinelli?" she said in a hestitant voice.

He smiled. "Laura."

"That's right."

"Don't call me Mr. Spinelli. I like people to call

me Phil," he said. and gestured toward the car. The chauffeur opened the door again, and Laura got in. The back of the car was enormously roomy, and the upholstery was luxurious. A sliding glass panel separated the rear compartment from the driver's cabin.

"Hungry?" Spinelli asked, grinning.

"Some," Laura said.

"What about the Henri IX? Or don't you like French cuisine?"

Laura almost said, *I don't know, I've never tried it.* But she checked herself in time. Settling back against the wonderfully buoyant upholstery, she smiled and said, "I love it."

"Henri IX," Spinelli said to the chauffeur, and slid the glass panel shut.

As the car pulled away and swung eastward in a big, arrogant U-turn, Laura turned slightly to eye Spinelli. He was younger than she had expected—no more than thirty-five at the very most, and possibly even a few years younger. He was a medium height, extremely well dressed, with a relaxed, cosmopolitan manner. His face was tanned, his dark hair thick and curly, and he wore a neat little clipped mustache. He was, Laura thought, one of the most handsome men she had ever seen. He positively radiated wealth. power, animal magnetism, strength. An enormous sapphire glinted from a massive gold ring on one hand. Even his wristwatch was formidable, a sleek oval face with all manner of smaller dials on it.

He was looking her over thoroughly, too. And, so far as Laura could tell, he seemed to be pleased.

As they reached the corner he said. "Would you care for a drink, Laura?"

She smiled in faint confusion. "A drink? You mean, we'll get out now?"

Spinelli chuckled. "I mean right here and now. This is a very well-equipped car." Leaning forward, he pressed his fingers against a wooden panel on the rear of the front seat, and the panel swung open, revealing a miniature bar within. "What about a Manhattan?" Spinelli asked.

Laura was too astonished to answer the question, at first. Staring at the bar in wonder, she said, "I didn't know automobiles could have things like this."

"A custom job can. A Manhattan?"

"Oh—yes. Yes, thanks."

Spinelli took a glass from a rack and punched a spigot. Amber liquid squirted out. "I keep Manhattans and Martinis readymade under refrigeration here," he explained, as he took a cherry from a plastic container and popped it into her drink. "It's a nuisance trying to mix things while the car is moving." He filled a second cocktail glass with a martini for himself, and they sat back. Laura sipped her drink. It was delicious; and, in the big car, there were no jounces, no bumps. The ride was serene.

Spinelli said, "I suppose you're wondering how I happened to get your phone number."

"I suppose I am," Laura said.

Spinelli smiled amiably. "I have a number of friends around town who keep me informed about promising newcomers," he said. "I like to know about it whenever a lovely girl comes to New York—especially when she's looking for a job in the entertainment world. One day last week there was a call from one of my friends, a Mr. McCarten."

Laura stiffened involuntarily.

"Something wrong?" Spinelli asked easily.

Laura forced a smile. "Mr. McCarten and I had —some unpleasantness."

"Oh? He didn't mention that. He did say you were an extremely handsome young woman, and I must remark his judgment was excellent. And he thought you might be receptive to an offer from me. I'm—ah—in a form of the entertainment world myself. Mr. McCarten told me where I could reach you. and I phoned the Y, only to learn that you were out. When I called again the next day, they informed me you had moved, but they didn't know your address." Spinelli shrugged. "I was ready to write you off as a lost cause, until your telephone call. I'm delighted you were able to get in touch with me at last."

Laura sat back, sipping her drink. She found it hard to believe that this handsome, cultured young man could be the overlord of high-priced vice in New York City. But it was easy to read between the lines of what he was saying, to know that McCarten was one of Spinelli's talent scouts and had recommended her. It was strange that McCarten should think that a girl who had been raped of her virginity would be interested in becoming a call-girl—but perhaps McCarten was so shrewd a psychologist that he knew exactly what the effect of his act would be. Certainly it had led her in a straight line toward Spinelli.

The limousine pulled up in front of an East Side hotel. The chauffeur ran around to the side to open the door; Spinelli got out, helping Laura, and they entered the hotel together, she on his arm. The restaurant was at the rear of the hotel; the moment Spinelli

entered, a dignified-looking man in black came racing up, bowed, and gave him an effusive welcome.

"Your table is ready for you, Mr. Spinelli. If you and Mamselle will come this way, s'il-vous-plait?"

He led them the length of the lavishly-upholstered restaurant to a dim alcove at the very rear, where a table for two nestled in intimate darkness, separated somewhat from the rest of the dining room. Spinelli helped Laura off with her jacket, and, in turning, she made a half-bow, revealing her bosom to him. She noticed that his eyes flicked appreciatively to her breasts for an instant before returning to their usual blase expression.

"I have a permanent lunchtime reservation for this table," Spinelli explained softly, as they took their seats. "Sometimes, when the place is full and I am not here, they will telephone me for permission to give it to someone else. But normally it waits for me at all times. They are very kind to me here."

He gestured to a waiter, who glided over at once. There was no menu. Laura, having no idea what to order, smiled warmly and asked Spinelli to order for her.

Spinelli nodded. Speaking in smooth French, he said, "We'll begin with *escargot* today. Onion soup for the lady, *petite marmite* for me, and the baked pheasant for two. With a bottle of the '47 Tavel, Pierre."

The waiter moved away. Laura asked Spinelli for a translation, which he supplied.

While waiting for the snails, he said, "McCarten told me you had just arrived from Kansas. I don't suppose you have many restaurants of the grand cuisine out there, do you?"

"Not very many," Laura said.

"You don't have to pretend with me," Spinelli said gently. "I know you want to seem sophisticated, Laura, but you don't have to be afraid to admit things. You're a very beautiful girl. The sophistication can come later. You've never eaten in a French restaurant, have you?"

Laura glanced at the table. "No."

"All right. There's a first time for everything. Don't you agree?"

"Yes," she murmured. "A first time for eating snails—and a first time for other things."

"But you've experienced some of the other things already, haven't you?"

Color came to her cheeks. "Yes," she said.

"Good. I just wanted to start clearing up any misconceptions you may have. McCarten gave me a rather ambiguous report about you." Spinelli toyed with his silverware. "You are twenty-three?"

"Twenty-one. Did he tell you—?"

"He told me you were twenty-one. I'm a very suspicious man, my dear, and I like to try to catch people in little slips. I believe in perfect honesty, both on my part and on the part of my associates."

The waiter returned, bearing a little tray of snails. Laura stared at them in some anxiety, but Spinelli quickly dispelled it. Carefully he showed her how to grip the shell in the little clamp and extract the snail with the tiny fork, and how to mop up the delicious garlic-butter sauce with a bit of bread. The snails were magnificent. Laura had been apprehensive about eating them, but she found nothing repugnant at all about them.

Spinelli seemed to be in no hurry. He kept up a smooth flow of conversation, generally aimed at trying to draw Laura out. She abandoned all attempts at pretense of sophistication—but, at the same time, she endeavored to let him know that she was not utterly innocent. She kept from him any hint that she had been a streetwalker for the past several days. As Marilyn had pointed out, that would hardly enhance her market value to him.

At length, when only a few scraps of pheasant remained on their plates, Spinelli said, "I think the time has come to take off the masks we've been wearing. Laura, do you know what sort of employment I can offer you?"

"I think so."

"Don't try to make guesses." Spinelli steepled his fingers. "I don't know what stories you may have heard about me, but probably they're all fairly accurate, if somewhat coarsened. One of my chief enterprises is a kind of entertainment service. I provide feminine companionship for a wealthy and carefully chosen clientele, largely business executives. Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly," she said in a steady voice.

Spinelli looked a little surprised. "McCarten remarked that you seemed a trifle naive to him. Perhaps his standards of evaluation need some revising."

Gently Laura said, "I had only been in New York four days when I met him. I've had an extra week, now, and a week more in New York makes quite a difference."

"Evidently," Spinelli said. He stared evenly at Laura. "I have reason to want you to join my staff,"

he said. "The activities you will engage in are far from unpleasant, and highly lucrative. The girls on my staff earn between $20,000 and $50,000 a year, all of it tax free. The amount they earn is limited only by their eagerness and—ah—abilities. I think there's an opportunity for you. You're free to leave my employ at any time, so long as you give me adequate notice—say, two or three weeks. Most of my girls stay with me five or six years. The nature of the work brings you in contact with a good deal of promising matrimonial material. You'd be amazed to learn how many wives of executives are my alumnae. At no time will I stand in the way of a good match—though naturally I'll expect that you keep my interests in mind when you take up your life as the wife of a wealthy man." Spinelli smiled urbanely. "Don't give me any decision yet, please. There are certain technicalities to settle before we can arrive at any agreement. If you're absolutely positive you're not interested, let me know at the end of the meal, and we can go our separate ways. Otherwise, I'd like you to come up to my apartment for some further discussions."

Laura nodded. "Very well."

Spinelli lingered over dessert and coffee, and he finished the meal off with cognac. It was now well over two hours since they had entered the restaurant. When he was ready to leave, he put a five-dollar bill on the table and they departed without waiting for a check. Probably they simply sent him a monthly bill, Laura decided. She wondered how much the meal had cost. Twenty or thirty dollars, probably.

The limousine was waiting. Spinelli looked at her inquiringly.

"Shall I take you home, Laura?"

She smiled. "I'd rather continue the discussion," she said.

He looked gratified. He helped her into the car and it drove off, eastward to a towering apartment building in the mid-Sixties, overlooking the river. Spinelli dismissed the chauffeur and escorted Laura into the glittering lobby. They rode up, up endlessly it seemed, getting out finally on the twentieth floor. The elevator opened right into a foyer of an enormous apartment. As they walked in, a massive man came out of a room off to the left, bearing a sheaf of papers.

Spinelli nodded. "Laura Haynes, this is George Skalkottis, my personal secretary. Say hello to Miss Haynes, George."

"Hello," the big man said. Laura recognized it as the voice of the man who had answered the phone earlier that day. Skalkottis looked like nothing so much as a well-dressed ape. She shivered imperceptibly, realizing that the "personal secretary" was probably really a bodyguard and hired killer. Spinelli's urbane charm had almost made her forget the fact that he was a criminal.

"Save the messages for later, George," Spinelli said airily. "Miss Haynes and I have business to discuss. See that we're not disturbed for at least an hour."

"Yes, sir."

"Come, Laura."

Spinelli led her through a series of breathtakingly beautiful rooms, into one final room at least forty feet long and twenty wide, which opened out onto a terrace that gave a magnificent view of the river and

of Queens beyond it. The big room was lavishly furnished, with a big hi-fi set, an enormous bar, and a vast divan big enough to sleep two. Laura noticed that Spinelli clicked the door shut behind him. He moved gracefully to the controls of the hi-fi set and flicked a knob, and soft string music filtered into the room from what seemed like every direction.

"Another cognac?" Spinelli suggested.

Laura took the drink from him. They stood together at the terrace, admiring the view, sipping the drinks. Laura waited tensely, knowing what was coming. It would be a personal test of her abilities, she thought.

Spinelli's hand rested lightly on her shoulders. Suddenly, putting the drink down, he spun her around and bent to kiss her breasts just above the neckline of her dress. His hands left her shoulders, travelling down her sides and trailing lightly over her buttocks.

Without a word, Spinelli began to undress her. She tried to remain calm as he unzipped her dress and drew it off, removed her slip, and unhooked the tight bra that thrust her breasts upward. Despite his silence, she could see the obvious pleasure in his eyes at the sight of her full round breasts bare before him. Continuing, he knelt to unhook her garters, and delicately rolled her stockings off. His hands moved with a surgeon's finesse. The panties and garter-belt followed, and she stood naked before him, feeling the color mount to her throat and breasts under his intense appraising gaze. She put her hands on her hips and stood with her legs slightly apart while he looked her over.

Then he removed his own clothes, just as silent-

ly. His body had an athlete's lean symmetry, with wide, muscular shoulders and a deep chest, tapering to narrow hips and thickly-muscled but narrowing legs. He was tanned an even golden-brown over every part of his body.

Smiling, but still silently, he came toward her, took her by the hand, led her toward the divan. He folded his arms around her, and she felt the flat muscles of his chest tight against her breasts, and, gently, he drew her down on the divan.

He was an expert lover. He played on her body as though it were a fine musical instrument, and every motion was a graceful, unhurried one. Desperately, because of her lack of experience, Laura tried to play the part of an experienced woman. She took her cues from him. He seemed to sense that she had never made love in a fully willing way before, because every touch was one of tenderness. His fingertips lightly caressed her nipples until they became hard and erect. His lips darted like a butterfly's wings over her entire body. His hands brought gasps of pleasure to her.

At last he decided that they could complete the act. Laura was clinging to him, eager and aroused, and he seemed magically to float above her, until she began to feel the rippling waves of ecstacy and she could no longer keep her eyes open.

She closed them, and her lips parted to admit his tongue, and she felt warmth rise up and surround her, soft soothing warmth like the loving embrace of the womb, and with every motion new pleasure inflamed her. Her breath was coming in irregular bursts now, and whenever she opened her eyes she saw Spinelli smiling above her, always calm, always silent.

She cried out, a moaning wordless cry of delight, and felt her muscles contract and her skin grow cold, and she moved feverishly in her ecstacy, subsiding after a moment with throbbing heart. Spinelli was still with her, though, carrying her along from one height to the next, smiling, bending his head now to kiss her breasts or to nibble thrillingly at the fleshy part of her. Her breath was coming in irregular bursts now, until finally—it seemed like hours later—Spinelli's grasp tightened on her shoulders, and he quivered and she cried out one last time, and then all was still. She wrapped her arms around him and held him tight against her.

For some time they remained that way. Then Spinelli rose from her and walked to the window. Naked, he stood with his back to her, looking out over the islands of the East River.

He spoke, at last, for the first time since it had begun.

"You're very beautiful," he said. His voice was deeper, harsher than it had been before.

Laura said nothing. Her body still throbbed from the afterglow of their sensual encounter.

"I want you to work for me," Spinelli said, turning around. "You're magnificent. For a novice, you're tremendous. I'll guarantee you $500 a week, and you can have a month's salary in advance before you walk out of this apartment today. What do you say?"

"I'll take it," Laura said in a voice she hardly recognized.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE TWENTY HUNDRED-DOLLAR BILLS new and crisp, made a neat little stack. Spinelli toyed with them, tapping them together, shuffling and reshuffling them. It was half an hour since they had made love. They had donned their clothing once again.

Spinelli said, "This will be four weeks' advance against your earnings. I'll expect you to buy some fine clothing—if you need help picking anything, one of my other girls will help you. You'll move across town as soon as possible, into an apartment that more nearly reflects your economic status. It probably won't often be necessary for you to receive clients in your home, but I want you to live well anyway. When you travel, you'll travel by taxi. When you eat, you'll eat only at the best places. You're not a Kansas farm-girl any more, remember. You're a sophisticated Manhattanite, and I want you to live the part twenty-four hours a day."

"It shouldn't be too hard," Laura said.

"As for your working day: I'll have to insist that you be within telephone range from three o'clock on, every day. When possible, I'll try to line up your assignments in advance. The general arrangement is that you meet the client for dinner, attend a show with him, and go to his hotel. Most of your clients will be out-of-towners, executives. You'll be eating at the best places in town, so I suggest you keep an eye on your weight. You cease to be valuable when you begin to get bloated." Spinelli smiled smoothly.

"There'll be various special assignments for you—trips out of town, parties at conventions, things like that. You'll be notified well in advance when possible. Some of my clients have—ah—unusual tastes in sexual practices. In the beginning, I'll keep you away from the really oddball ones. I have specialist girls for them, anyway."

"And you'll pay me a regular salary, is that it?" Laura asked.

Spinelli nodded. "Five hundred a week, payable every Wednesday in cash. My messenger will drop the money off at your apartment, and you'll give him a receipt for it. Aside from the base salary, you may receive gifts from your clients. Anything they give you is yours—but you must report it to me, even if it's only a few dollars. Is that clear? I insist on knowing what they give you."

"Fair enough," Laura said. "How will they pay for my services?"

"I bill them. No money will change hands through you, except what they choose to give you for yourself. I refuse to let my girls be forced to act as collection agents for me. You render services: I worry about collecting the fee for them."

Laura crossed her legs. "Just as a matter of curiosity, could you tell me how much you'd collect for my night's services?"

Spinelli showed even white teeth in a flickering smile. "The answer to that is no. All you need to know is that my operations show a profit despite the basic overhead of the girl's salary. Incidentally, you'll have six days off each month. You can generally pick these yourself, but you'll have to give me a couple

of days' notice. On the days when you're unable for —ah—personal reasons to give complete services, you'll be assigned to less intimate social events." Spinelli stood up and pushed the little sheaf of hundred-dollar bills toward her. "Are there any questions?"

"Yes," Laura said. "I've got a friend, a girl I'm rooming with. Is it all right if I let her share my new apartment?"

"Absolutely not."

"But—"

Spinelli's face grew stern. "I don't want any complications. None of my girls are allowed to share their apartments, even with other girls of the staff. If you think this friend of yours is interested in this sort of work, I'll be happy to interview her—but you can't go on living with her."

Laura shook her head. "She's—not very pretty," she said in a low voice. "I don't think you'd be able to use her. But—I wish I didn't have to split up with her—"

"I don't believe in making exceptions," Spinelli said coolly. "Understood?"

Laura shrugged. "Yes."

"Everything's agreed, then?"

"Agreed," Laura said in a low voice. "When do I start?"

"There's no rush. The end of the week, perhaps. I'll arrange for an apartment for you tomorrow, and you can begin furnishing it right away. My decorator will help you, and we can arrange any kind of payment scheme you like. Also, tomorrow, you'll come here to be photographed."

"Photographed?"

"Like this," Spinelli said, taking a large flat book from a desk drawer. He handed it to Laura. It was thick, printed on glossy paper. It consisted of page after page of photographs of girls, all of them nude, photographed from front and back and in several angles. Laura reddened faintly, and gave the book back to him.

"Why?" she asked.

"Expensive stores have display windows for their goods. This book is my display window. When a client insists on seeing in advance what he's paying for, I show him the book. Your pictures will be in the next edition." Spinelli laughed. "Don't worry, though. The book has a highly limited circulation. Only a very exclusive few ever get to see it, and no copy can be bought at any price." He looked at his watch. "Run along, now. I'll phone you tomorrow when your apartment is rented."

Laura felt dizzy as she stepped out. It was hard to believe that she had two thousand dollars in cash in her handbag, harder to believe that in a few days of rocketlike rapidity she had taken up and abandoned a career as a streetwalker and had stumbled somehow into the glittering and money-laden life of the call girl.

She started to look around for the subway; then, remembering what Spinelli had told her, she hailed a cab and took it to Columbus Circle. She got out and looked around for several minutes before finding Marilyn.

The slim prostitute was sitting glumly on one of the benches just inside the park, obviously having

a slow afternoon. But she brightened the moment she saw Laura approach, running toward her and embracing her.

"Well?" Marilyn asked eagerly. "Tell me all about it. What happened! What did he do?"

"I made the grade," Laura said simply.

"Great!"

"He took me to lunch—fabulous place—and he explained the setup. Then he took me up to his apartment and sort of tested me out, and told me I could have the job if I wanted it. For five hundred bucks a week."

Marilyn gasped. "Five hundred—!"

"And he gave me a month's advance. I'm going to go on the most glorious shopping spree a girl ever went on, Marilyn. He's getting me an apartment, too, on the East Side, and—*oh.*""

Marilyn looked up, anguish on her thin face, "I figured."

"I'm sorry, Marilyn," Laura said gently, and tears came to her eyes. "I asked him if you could room with me. He said Absolutely no. No roommates of any kind. That was emphatic."

Marilyn smiled wanly. "That's okay, hon. I'm not in your league, anyway. You wouldn't want me around. I'm a hundred percent for you, Laura. I think all this is wonderful." She shrugged. "What the hell, I'm not any worse off than before I met you. I'll find another roommate sooner or later."

"We'll keep in touch," Laura promised, but already she began to see that they would not. Marilyn belonged to a different world, a shabby world of $3.50 hotel rooms and five-dollar tricks. It would

be inevitable that the gulf between them would widen as Laura moved into more and more exalted circles.

Laura persuaded Marilyn to quit for the day, even though she hadn't turned a single trick yet. "I'll pay you for what you'd be losing," Laura said gaily. "Let's go downtown and do some shopping—the stores are open late tonight, aren't they? And we'll have a little party, you and me, just for old time's sake."

It was not as joyous an evening as it might have been. Laura stubbornly insisted that Marilyn should get herself some new clothes, and that she would pay for them. Marilyn was unwilling, but Laura kept at it. At length, Marilyn bought a dress and a few blouses, while Laura treated herself to virtually an entire wardrobe, telling the clerks that she was moving and would notify the store of her new address so delivery could be made. The clothing bill came to $250, and Laura lightheartedly paid for it in hundred-dollar bills, to the astonishment of the clerks.

An undercurrent of gloom marred the evening, despite every attempt to keep things festive. They ate out—Laura was not very hungry, after the big lunch, and she limited herself to a few drinks and sandwiches—and then went back to the apartment and talked till very late about Laura's new future. They went to sleep in the same bed, in each other's arms, but they did not make love.

There was a call at eleven the following morning from Skalkottis, Spinelli's secretary. "Mr. Spinelli says to tell you to get your things packed right away, and he'll send the car over to pick you up.

How soon can you be ready?"

"Give me an hour."

"Okay," Skalkottis rumbled. "The car will be in front of your place at noon."

With Marilyn's help, Laura packed quickly, and she was ready to go by quarter to twelve. The two girls waited silently for the minutes to pass. There was not much that could easily be said.

At five to twelve a horn honked down below. Laura glanced out the window and saw Spinelli's limousine in front of the house. Spinelli himself had not come, only the chauffeur. While Marilyn bustled about, frantically getting everything together, Laura slipped into the bedroom. Quietly, she drew two hundred-dollar bills from her purse and, folding them up, put them in the medicine cabinet. She knew that Marilyn would never accept the money if it were offered—but perhaps this way she would keep it.

Marilyn and Laura brought the luggage downstairs, and the chauffeur stored it in the trunk. Laura turned to her friend before getting into the car.

"So long," she said. "I'll be in touch."

"Just live well," Marilyn said. "Have the best of everything. You deserve it, hon."

They kissed—quickly, like sisters—and then Laura entered the long black car. It purred serenely away from the curb.

Spinelli was waiting impatiently in the big apartment. Greeting Laura impersonally, he said, "I've got a place for you on 65th right off the East River Drive. Four rooms, terrace. It'll set you back $325 a month.

Laura whistled. "So much?"

"Believe me, that's cheap. Dirt cheap. You have to live in a good place if you work for me, Laura. My decorator's coming over in an hour or so, and we'll all go over there and plan things out for you. Meanwhile let's get the photography out of the way."

One room of Spinelli's sprawling apartment had been converted into a regular photo studio. The photographer, a thin, bald man with a domed head and a peculiarly glassy-eyed stare, was busily setting up lights and chalking off angles.

"All set?" Spinelli asked him crisply.

"Another few minutes, Mr. Spinelli. If the young lady will remove her clothing so all marks of garments and belts can disappear—"

Laura hesitated. Skalkottis had come into the room.

"Go ahead," Spinelli said. "Didn't you hear him?"

"In front of everybody?" she asked.

"These men have seen the female body before, Laura. Yours isn't going to be anything new to them. Come on, let's get the show moving."

Swallowing any lingering vestige of modesty, Laura began to remove her clothes. She unbuttoned her blouse and draped it over a table, removed her skirt, took off the half-slip. She sensed the tension in the room as she bared her breasts; maybe these men had seen the female body before, but they certainly took a lively interest in hers. A moment later, the panties and garter-belt joined the rest of her clothing, and she was nude.

"Over here," Spinelli ordered. "Stand under the

light. Heinsohn, how does she look?"

At the photographer's gesture, Laura turned in a complete circle. The photographer said, "The garter-belt has left a mark on the upper part of her buttocks, as you see. Otherwise she is ready. We'll do the front views first, and perhaps by then the back will be ready."

Efficiently, he went about his work. He was obviously a master of the art of photographing women. He showed Laura how to hold her arms against her sides so her breasts would thrust forward even more than they already did; he asked her to suck in her belly, to stand at a slight angle, to smile with drooping lips, to look at the camera with slitted eyes. He took more than a dozen shots—downward over her shoulder to catch the steep thrust of her bosom, upwards toward the crotch, profile, breast close-ups, everything. By that time, the marks on her rear had disappeared and he was able to complete the set.

"I want the proofs at nine tomorrow morning," Spinelli said. He patted Laura's buttocks. "Back into the clothes, girl. I'll show you your apartment now."

Laura dressed quickly, and she and Spinelli drove the few blocks to her new apartment. It was in an extremely modern building, and the apartment was an attractive one, with spacious room and a nice little terrace. Spinelli soon left, pleading urgent business elsewhere, and Laura and Spinelli's decorator—a plump, dowdy little woman— conferred on the furnishings.

Evidently Spinelli had pull even in the furni-

ture world. Later that evening, a van pulled up with a temporary bed and chest of drawers for Laura, to last her for the few weeks it would take until her permanent furniture arrived.

The next few days were hectic ones for Laura. She was busy poring over fabrics and designs, spending sums of money that would have seemed incredible to her only a week before. Spinelli told her not to worry, that he would cover the cost of the apartment and she could pay him back over as long a period of time as she chose.

The telephone was installed on the third day—a gleaming ivory one in the bedroom-to-be, and a beige wall extension in the kitchen. The apartment began to take shape as, with fantastic speed, the furnishings arrived. Laura saw little of Spinelli during those days. He dropped in from time to time to see what progress was being made, and he brought over the proofs of Laura's photos to show her. They were astonishingly intimate shots, and she blushed to see them, much to Spinelli's amusement.

One of Spinelli's other girls was detailed to fill Laura in on the ropes. She was a glamorous, somehow brittle-looking blonde in her late twenties, who gave her name as Tania. Tania, it seemed, was one of the veterans of Spinelli's staff, one who handled many of the "specialty" clients. She gave Laura a thorough coaching on what she was expected to do when with clients.

Laura listened carefully. She wanted to be a good pupil. She wanted to be worth her salary.

At the end of that week, she had her first chance.

There was a call from Spinelli at half past two that day. "I've got an assignment for you," he said simply.

Laura felt a flutter of nervousness. "When?"

"Tonight. One of the regulars came down with her monthlies a day early, damn her. I need you to pinch-hit."

"What's the setup?"

"Double date," Spinelli said. "Two purchasing agents from a midwestern department-store chain company are in town, and an air-conditioning outfit promised to send them a couple of girls, just to sweeten things up. You and Tania are the dates. They're staying at the Hudson. You meet them there at six for dinner, and the rest of the evening's up to them. Take your cues from Tania and it'll be all right."

Tania phoned a few minutes later to arrange to meet her. Tania lived on the next block; they met at the corner of 59th and First and hailed a cab to the Hudson Hotel. Laura wore one of her new dresses, an extremely *decollete* affair which bared her breasts practically to the nipples, while Tania's dress was a severe, high-neckline affair that pulled taut against her body and accentuated the sharp outjutting contours of her bosom.

The purchasing agents had a suite on the ninth floor. At six sharp, Tania and Laura were knocking on the door.

The man who answered was in his late forties, tall and plump and bland-looking. Before he could say anything, Tania said warmly, "*Hello,* there. Are you Lou Hazen?"

They stepped inside. The second man emerged —shorter, leaner, a little older. His name was Dave Hesse, and the girls introduced themselves. Deftly, Tania slipped her arm through Lou Hazen's, thereby establishing a coupling for the evening and avoiding any possible confusion about which date was which, at least at the start.

They had a gay and lengthy dinner at a nightclub, and stayed around for part of the floor show. Then Hazen suggested, none too subtly, that they return to the hotel and have a little "party."

In the two-bedroom suite, they ordered drinks and setups from room service, and until about eleven-thirty they had a party. Tania did as little drinking as possible, and Laura followed her lead. The men seemed to be having a good time. They told the filthiest jokes Laura had ever heard, and they grew increasingly uninhibited as the evening wore on; Tania sat on Hazen's lap, and he had his hand thrust up under her skirt between her legs, while Laura sprawled out on the couch with her head in Hesse's lap while he slipped his hands into her dress, and under her bra to cup the warm large breasts and play with her stiff nipples.

Still later, the couples were kissing intimately, and finally Hesse leaned over Laura drunkenly and said, "C'mon inside. We need some privacy."

Obediently, Laura went into one of the bedrooms with him, and Hesse closed the door. "Take off y'r clothes," he ordered thickly. She did so, while he undressed too. He was hairy and had the beginnings of a potbelly. He eyed her admiringly. "You got a nice paira tits, you know? Jeez, if my wife

only had a pair like that. Wish I could take them back to Illinois with me."

He staggered forward toward the bed and tumbled down on top of her. "Letsh have relations," he whispered. "Isn't that what they call it, relations? They got some other words for it, too, but I like relations."

He began to laugh, as though he had said something tremendously funny, and he was still laughing as he entered her. Laura caressed him impersonally, as though he were a statue come to life, and he continued to chuckle until it was over.

Almost immediately, he was asleep.

Laura lay by his side for a long while, hearing laughter coming from the next room. Suddenly the door opened, and Hazen stood there, stark naked, his fat body pale and soft. Tania was with him too, also naked. Her nakedness had a sleek, tawny quality about it.

Tania said, "Is he asleep?"

"Like a light."

"Come on inside, then. Hazen wants us both."

What followed was complicated, and Laura had never dreamed that such acts were commonplace. Hazen sprawled out on his bed with both girls, switching from one to the other without reaching fulfillment in either, until finally he clasped Tania tight to completion. By that time, Hesse was awake and ready again. The rollicking party went on hectically until nearly five in the morning, when both Hesse and Hazen, exhausted, indicated they had had enough fun for the evening. Just before tottering off to bed, Hazen found his trousers and

pulled out a bill.

"Here," he said, extending it to Laura. "You're good girls. Have some fun with this."

Laura took it and showed it to Tania as Hazen went into the bedroom. It was a hundred.

Tania grinned. "Fifty apiece. Not bad at all, even with the specialty stuff."

"Can we go home now?"

"Nothing stopping us. How do you feel?"

"A little shaky. I've never done things like that before."

"You'll get used to them," Tania chuckled. "These mid-westerners have the damndest ideas, sometimes."

Laura went into the bathroom and tidied herself up, and dressed while Tania was washing. Hazen and Hesse were sound asleep, snoring blissfully. "They'll sleep like logs now," Tania said. "Well, I hope we sold plenty of air-conditioners tonight."

"They seemed to like us," Laura said.

"You all ready?"

"Just about."

"Phone the desk and ask them to call a cab for us while I'm getting dressed," Tania said. "After a night like this I can always use plenty of sleep." She yawned. "Spinelli wants me to turn in a report on your performance tonight, by the way, Laura. And I'm going to give him a good one. You did damned well for a beginner, you know. Damned well."

CHAPTER EIGHT

WITHIN A WEEK, THERE NO LONGER was any novelty for Laura in mingling with rich men and accepting money from them for her favors. Within two weeks, her new career had settled down as a routine. Each day, about three o'clock, Spinelli or one of his assistants would phone her and tell her the details of that evening's assignment. At the earliest—when the evening began with a dinner date—she had to set out about six; other engagements began as late as nine or ten. She would taxi to her rendezvous, which almost always turned out to be in one of the fine hotels in the Fifties, and for the rest of the evening she would take part in whatever sociability was required of her. Generally she was free to go home by three or four in the morning, though sometimes she had to remain until dawn. When she got home, she would sleep for eight hours, get up, breakfast lightly, and spend the hours after noon shopping or reading or at a movie matinee. By three, she was back in the apartment to await Spinelli's call.

It was difficult, at first, to adjust to a schedule that involved staying up half the night and sleeping all morning, but gradually she found herself accommodating to the change. It was harder to adapt to the sudden quantity of fine food and liquor that her profession required her to consume; she quickly learned to eat sparingly when on dates, to drink as little as she possibly could without seeming un-

sociable, and to cut down on her other meals of the day. She skipped lunches altogether and reduced breakfast to a matter of juice, toast, and coffee, and thus was able to cope with the output of New York's finest restaurants each evening without undue ill effects.

The assignments were varied. One night she was picked to accompany an aging steelman to the theater. She sat at his side through a musical, clinging appreciatively to his arm during intermissions and attracting a lot of attention by her daring neckline. After the theater they visited a nightspot and went to his hotel. It turned out that he was not interested in making love. He asked her to undress, watching eagerly as each garment came off. When she was totally naked, he inspected her body with weird curiosity, and then put her clothes back on her. She undressed two or three more times, and he fondled her and pinched her and ogled her body, and then gave her fifty dollars and sent her home.

Another time, Laura's task was to attend a convention of automobile dealers. She and two other girls, a brunette named Gloria and a blonde called Charlene, were assigned to the task of setting themselves up in the bedrooms of a big suite belonging to one of the automobile manufacturers, and entertaining certain specific guests. By the end of that evening, Laura figured that she had slept with close to a dozen bigshot auto dealers—but her tips for the evening's work came to more than $200, and when she left the hotel, at four-thirty in the morning, she was able to blot the succession of grunting paunchy men from her mind with ease.

Tips were running high—anywhere from $150 to $450 a week, on top of her regular salary. Each day when she talked to Spinelli she scrupulously reported the amount of cash she had been given the night before. She sent some of it to him to cover the furniture expenses, and spent the rest on clothing, furs, jewelry, fine objects of art for her apartment. She banked fifty dollars every week no matter what expenses she had, and when she could manage it she put a hundred away. Her years of big money earning couldn't last forever, she knew, and if she saved systematically there would be a cushion of quite a few thousand dollars by the time she quit.

One day a few weeks after Laura had begun working for Spinelli, he called up with a weekend assignment. "Fellow named Burrows," Spinelli said. "He's an advertising man who owns a yacht, and he's giving a little weekend shindig for his possible future employer. He wants two girls to liven the proceedings up during the weekend. I'm sending Charlene to take care of the guest—how about you for the host?"

"Sounds swell," Laura said. "When and where?"

"This weekend. The yacht's kept in Long Island Sound. I'll have you and Char driven out to the place Saturday morning. Take Friday off so you'll be well rested," Spinelli told her.

She was up bright and early on Saturday. It was almost a novelty not to be getting up after noon. She packed a light frock and a couple of bikinis and some evening wear, and at noon she was in front of her house waiting for the limousine

to arrive.

Charlene was already aboard. She was a tall, slim, solemn girl of about twenty-four—not busty like Laura, but more elegant, more like a high fashion model. The two girls smiled hellos and settled down for the long drive out into the country.

At one-thirty they reached the North Shore home of the advertising man. He came out to meet the limousine. Burrows was a rangy, goodlooking bachelor of thirty-two; his guest, Stan Fields, was closer to fifty, with a worried, uncertain look. Both men were deeply tanned, and both were dressed in polo shirts and Bermuda shorts.

After introductions, Burrows said, "Everything's all ready aboard ship. Suppose we head out there now."

There was a launch out back, belonging to the marina, and they rode out to Burrows' yacht. The boat was good-sized, a sleek, low white ship with two masts. "I'll bet he won't be through paying for it for twenty years," Charlene murmured in a low voice as they stepped out onto the schooner's deck.

Burrows and his guest busied themselves, slipping the mooring and heading out of the harbor under power while the girls stowed their personal gear in the staterooms belowdecks, and changed into bikinis. When they came up above again, the motor was killed and the two men were energetically making sail.

"Help with those halyards!" Burrows yelled. "You girls didn't think you were here just as decorations, did you?"

Laura and Charlene pitched in, and the canvas

rose and bellied out in the breeze.

"We're under way," Burrows said. "Laura, there are martinis in the refrigerator down below. Want to break them out and do the honors while I'm heading for the cove?"

Laura efficiently served drinks in the cockpit. The sleek ship raced along, heading eastward through the Sound, until finally Burrows pulled it into a secluded cove and dropped anchor. Here, they could frolic undisturbed all weekend.

It was half past two, now, and the warm late-spring sun beat down. The four yachters downed martinis for a while, accompanying them with hors d'oeuvres from Burrows' well-stocked galley. It was after the third round of drinks that the older advertising man said, "How about a swim, Teddy-lad?"

"Fine with me," Burrows said. "Girls?"

The girls were already in their swimsuits—eye-popping bikinis that consisted merely of a double-diamond-shaped piece covering loins and buttocks but leaving all but the essential parts bare, and a nipple-shielding strip under the arms. Burrows and Fields went belowdecks and returned a few moments later in trunks.

They dove overboard and splashed in the cool, clear water for a while. The coupling had definitely been established—Laura and Burrows, Charlene and Fields—and there was a good deal of horseplay in the water. Exhausted, Laura swam to the side of the boat and hung on. Burrows came paddling up behind her and locked his legs around her body, slipping his hands up and cupping her breasts. She turned around halfway and kissed him, and at the

same moment his hands found the catch of her bikini halter and opened it. The bit of cloth fell away. Her breasts, round and full, rose into his hands. She turned to face him fully now, and they bobbed in the water, his hands cupping her breasts, her leg thrust between his thighs, both of them laughing and panting in excitement. Laura heard giggles from the other side of the ship, and knew that Charlene and Fields were engaging in similar shenanigans over there.

Burrows was busily engaged now in opening the loop that held Laura's breechcloth on. He had some trouble—the salt water made the cloth stiff—but finally he whipped the flimsy fabric away, tossing it and the halter up onto the deck. Laura was naked, now. The cool water was delightful against her bare breasts and loins. She found the beltstring of Burrows' trunks, pulled it, pulled them off. Now both of them were totally naked in the water.

"I've never done it in the water before," Burrows laughed. "I didn't ever think of the idea."

"There's always a first time," Laura said. She put her back to the boat, reaching behind her to grasp the ladder with each hand as a stabilizer. Burrows swam to her, and she locked her legs around him, moving back and forth. From the far side of the boat came a derisive yell: "Hey, cut that out! You're making waves!" Burrows laughed without replying.

The water surrounding them cooled them, slowing stimulation and prolonging the act. Laura clung to the lean, athletic body against hers, releasing her grip on the ladder as he took hold of it, and body

to body they gasped out their delight. At the highest moment, Burrows let go of the ladder. They slipped below the water, bodies still joined, and she felt the tingling sensation of a mutual climax while she held her breath, and then they were coming up for air and drifting apart and smiling.

Afterward, they clambered up on deck. Nude, Laura stretched out on the forward deck to bask in the sun, while Burrows lay at her side, gently stroking the silky skin of her buttocks. A little while later, Charlene and Fields came on board, both of them minus their bathing-suits, and all four sunbathed until the afternoon grew old and the breezes brisk. By five, everyone was in a gorgeously gay mood. Charlene served more cocktails, and then, as it began to get still cooler, they went belowdecks. Burrows made love to Laura again in his stateroom—he seemed tremendously virile—and then the girls prepared dinner, serving it wearing little aprons over their otherwise nude bodies.

After dinner, it was fishing time, to lay in a stock of food for tomorrow's lunch. Then the four of them gathered in the big salon near the galley for some music and necking. During a lull, Charlene explained to Laura exactly what kind of specialty Fields went in for. "They picked me specially for it because I don't mind doing it that way. Some girls can't stand it at all."

"I don't think I'd like it very much," Laura said. "It doesn't give the woman any satisfaction."

Charlene shrugged. "I told him I'd do it that way if we did it regular way too. So I'm taken care of, and so is he. All in a day's work, darling."

Night descended, starry and beautiful. Cold now in sweaters and slacks, they danced above deck until late, then retired. When he and Laura were in bed together, Burrows began telling her all of his troubles. He earned $32,000 a year at his present job, but he was heavily in debt, and hoped to transfer to the agency Fields helped to run—at a salary of $40,000 or better. The job was all but cinched, and inviting Fields out to the yacht for a weekend of coeducational fun and games was intended as the hoped-for clincher. "The only trouble," Burrows complained, "is that if I make $40,000 a year I'll spend $50,000. I can't help myself. It's like a disease. This yacht costs me thousands a year in upkeep alone. But I tell myself life wouldn't be worth living if I didn't own a yacht." Burrows laughed and cupped Laura's breasts. "Come here and give me a good time, honey. And wish me luck."

They made love three times that night, and in the morning, after breakfast, they swam and made love in the water once again. The older man, Fields, seemed to be beaming, so evidently Charlene had pleased him more than a little.

Burrows produced a camera and insisted on taking color shots of the girls, nude, as souvenirs of the weekend. He promised not to show the pictures to anyone, and to send them prints. They consented, and Burrows photographed them sunbathing on the deck, photographed Laura as she climbed breasts-first up the ladder out of the water, photographed Charlene with a life-preserver round her hips. Fields began to suggest some more imaginative poses, but luckily the film ran out long before any of his sug-

gestions could be acted upon.

Late that afternoon Burrows sailed the yacht back to his marina, and they returned to the mainland. Spinelli's limousine was waiting to take the girls back to Manhattan. As everyone said goodbye, Burrows folded a hundred-dollar bill into Laura's hand. "Thanks for making everything so wonderful," he whispered. "This is for you and Charlene to keep."

They were back in the city by sundown, and Laura went straight to her apartment. Tanned and tired, she stretched out on the couch and relaxed. It had been a swell weekend, she thought.

She thought of Marilyn, then, for the first time in weeks. Her promise to keep in touch had been foregone; things had simply been too hectic.

Marilyn doesn't spend weekends on yachts in Long Island Sound, Laura thought. *And my tip for that weekend was more than Marilyn earns in two whole days of grubby soliciting.* Laura felt sudden guilt. She tried not to think about rights and wrongs, now, but suddenly it seemed wrong that she should be living so luxurious a life.

For a moment she thought of phoning Marilyn. But she shook her head. Marilyn probably did not want to hear from her now. It would be only human for Marilyn to hate her, since envy turns easily to hate. Laura decided simply to forget Marilyn. She and Marilyn did not inhabit the same world any more, and any communication between the worlds was bound to be distorted.

She forced herself to forget about Marilyn.

It was June, now. She had been in New York

City for two months. Every week, she wrote a postcard to her grandparents, telling them how she was doing. It was practically the same postcard every week, because she knew the old people would not care. *Am holding a nice job and meeting interesting people. New York is a wonderful city. The weather is getting a little warm now. Send my best wishes to everyone back home. Your affectionate granddaughter, Laura.*

That was all that was needed—a formal reminder every now and then that she was still alive. She suspected the old folks never read the cards. They had their Bibles and their farm to keep them busy, and never went in much for family ties.

Laura took stock of her six weeks with Spinelli's syndicate, and the stock-taking surprised her. She had earned $3000 in salary, $2250 in tips, or almost nine hundred dollars a week. She had a well-furnished apartment, a lot of jewelry and furs, and a thousand dollars in the bank. With the furnishing expenses behind her and her wardrobe complete, she would be able to start building up the bank account now. She began to make elaborate plans. She would put ten thousand dollars in the savings bank, to start with, and then she would start buying stocks and bonds. As she grew richer, she would be earning more and more from her investments, and perhaps it would be possible for her to retire from the call-girl business altogether by the time she was twenty-eight or so.

Retire to what? she wondered.

Marriage? A theatrical career? Possibly, she thought. But she suspected that she would grow to

like her present soft life so well that she would never abandon it voluntarily. Having money pour in faster than it can be spent is an agreeable way to live. And, Laura told herself, she had never been much on asceticism.

One gilded day flowed into the next. Laura consorted with bankers, stockbrokers, salesmen, manufacturers. She was astonished by the magnitude of the business of sex. *If people only knew,* she thought, *how many big deals are clinched in bed—*

Dozens of influential executives had fondled her breasts. Scores of big-budget purchasing agents had been treated to an expensive night between her satiny thighs. Her lush bosom had been a decoration of more than one high-powered smokefilled-room conference at big conventions.

The summer wore on. The money poured in.

There was only one snag in paradise, though. Laura began to discover it as June came to an end and July began, and she settled down into the snug routine of a syndicate hostess.

She was lonely.

She had no friends.

Lovers, yes. But all one-night stands, or a weekend at most, and then they drifted off out of her life, and she out of theirs. Nor did she want any further contact with any of her clients. She had no interest in becoming friendly with a man who paid for sex.

But she had no personal friends. Marilyn was lost to her at the other side of an economic gulf; the other girls of the syndicate were friendly, but most of them were too busy or too tired for any

after-hours socializing, and, in any event, Spinelli frowned on much intimacy between girls of his syndicate.

She hardly ever saw Spinelli, either. He summoned her to his apartment every few weeks to stay the night with him, but that was all. He treated the girls of his syndicate as his personal harem, but there was always a fifty-dollar bonus in their pay envelope the week they had slept with Spinelli. He slept with the girls, he told Laura, to make sure they were staying in condition, and to keep tabs on the sort of services they were offering the clients. Laura enjoyed the evenings spent with him. But they were few and far between.

She took to wandering around the city on her days off, drifting idly from store-window to store-window, looking for something but not knowing what it was. The idea of remaining home, alone, was repugnant to her. The very act of being near people in the streets—even strangers—gave her pleasure.

That was how she met Dan Bittner.

It was a Thursday afternoon, late in July. There had been a heat-wave for the past two weeks, but it had abated somewhat, now, and Laura was out strolling on a day off. She was walking up 57th Street, looking in the windows, remembering that night so long ago—only three months, but it seemed like centuries—when she had stared into these same windows and had resolved someday to have money to buy beautiful things.

She had the money now—all she needed, and more, to buy anything she wanted. But it all seemed hollow, all the empty gaiety of the fine restaurants

and the gaudy musical shows. Lonely, bored, jaded, she wandered up 57th, across Madison toward Fifth. While waiting for the light to change, she happened to overhear a bitter quarrel just behind her.

"I don't care if you *do* have tickets!" a girl was snapping petulantly. "You can take the tickets and throw them away, for all I care! I'm not going, Dan."

"Listen, Ruth," a man's voice said mildly, "I paid six bucks apiece for those tickets, and it's lousy of you to back out now. I don't want to go alone, after all. Even if we've broken up, you could—"

"You could have found someone else!" the girl retorted. "You think you're going to shame me into going to that damn show with you, but I'm not! Find another date somewhere! Or just throw the tickets away, if you don't want to go. Goodbye!"

"Ruth!"

Laura paused, looking back. She saw a tall, very good-looking young man of perhaps twenty-seven or twenty-eight, staring in anguish at a well-dressed, angry-faced girl who was flouncing petulantly away.

"*Ruth!*" he yelled again. He gestured in frustration, as if trying to pull her back on invisible strings, but she was almost half a block away, and moving faster as she picked up steam.

Laura had no idea what made her speak up at that moment. But she was surprised to hear her voice say, "Don't go after her, Dan. She isn't worth getting excited over."

CHAPTER NINE

AN HOUR LATER, AS THEY SAT in a 58th Street restaurant together sipping cocktails, Laura quietly retraced in her mind the pattern of events that had brought them together. There had been the moment of mutual surprise, first, there on the busy street corner as they stared at each other, she surprised that she had spoken, he that he had been spoken to. Then the nervous laughter from both of them, breaking the awkwardness between two strangers on a Manhattan street, and his sudden grin and his admission, "No, you're right—she *isn't* worth getting excited over."

They might have parted at that moment and remained strangers forever, but they let the conversation continue, and within seconds they were no longer strangers, but Dan to her and Laura to him, and in a wild exhilarated way he was inviting her to have dinner with him and go to the show in Ruth's place, and she was telling him that she was free that evening and would be delighted to accept, and that was how it began.

And over drinks he told her about the quarrel and why it had been.

"Ruth's my fiancee," he explained. "Anyway, she *was*—up till about three weeks ago, when we decided to call the whole thing off. We both knew all along that we weren't right for one another but we just didn't have the guts, or something, to admit we'd made a mistake."

"Until three weeks ago."

"Until three weeks ago, yes. Then we had a big hassel and decided to nix it. Only we had these theater tickets for tonight, and we agreed we'd have one last date after a cooling-off period and see if we couldn't put things back together again." He let his shoulders slump. "So she met somebody else during the three weeks. Hell, I *wanted* her to. And she did. But when I phoned her about the theater date, she said she'd come anyway. And then she kept changing her mind, and I kept phoning her. It wasn't so much that I was afraid of wasting the tickets, as that I wanted to see her one last time, sort of get everything wrapped up neatly. So she met me in the city, but right away she started to back out—she said hello and goodbye practically in the same breath. I kept arguing with her, telling her at least we could have the one last date, but she didn't want to—"

"And that's where I came in," Laura said.

"Right."

"How long had you gone with her?"

He smiled sadly. "Two years and some," he said. "But it was all a mistake, all wasted time. Dope that I am, I would have gone running after her, too, if you hadn't spoken up then."

"I'm not in the habit of butting into other people's quarrels," Laura said quietly. "I don't know why I talked up just then."

"I'm glad you did."

"Are you really?"

"Really. Because otherwise I'd have gone after Ruth and we'd still be quarrelling. And I'd never

have met *you*."

He reached out across the table and squeezed her hand warmly. She smiled at him. It made her feel good all over to think that there was one man in New York City who was actually spending some time with her simply because he wanted to, not because he had bought her for the night and had to get his money's worth out of every minute.

Using the skill she had acquired in her new profession, she drew him out as they sipped their cocktails. His name was Dan Bittner; he was twenty-eight, a bachelor, a design engineer for a big industrial firm. Although he was seven years older than Laura, she regarded him inwardly as practically a child. He gave off an appearance of innocence. She suspected he might even be a virgin, improbable as it was to consider it.

He had never been married. Apparently there had been an unsuccessful romance before the Ruth affair, and between the two affairs he had simply used up the past four years without finding the warmth and security he was looking for. He seemed terribly lonely.

Two lonely people meeting on a street corner in Manhattan, Laura thought. *And he's so shy, so gentle. I wonder what he'd do or think if he found out how I earn my living.*

Eventually, as she knew it would have to, the conversation came around to her. When he asked her what she did, she replied glibly, "Oh, I'm a minor editor on a fashion magazine."

"Oh? Which one?"

Just as glibly, she said, "You wouldn't know it.

It's a trade-journal kind of thing that doesn't have newsstand circulation. It pays well, anyhow."

"What kind of work do you do?"

Laura had soaked up plenty of new information from her clients in the magazine field. She said without hesitation, "I'm a kind of high-salaried flunky. I do pasteups and write captions and check copy, and stuff like that. All very very dreary."

"Do you ever pose for the magazine?"

"Oh, no, never."

He smiled. "You should. You're prettier than any of the slabjawed models that get into all those magazine advertisements."

Laura tried to look confused. "By my boss' standards I'm hideous. My face is too full, my figure is too big, I've got too much behind—"

"Your boss is out of her mind."

"My boss knows her audience," Laura said. By this time she had conjured up a complete picture of the magazine where she allegedly worked, complete with the chic offices on upper Madison Avenue and the grimfaced bachelor-lady editor in the severely tailored mannish suits. "You don't sell lady's fashions using girlie-magazine models. You use walking skeletons. Don't ask me why."

"Suppose I ask you what you want for dinner, instead. We're going to miss the first act if we don't start stepping things up."

It was a show that Laura had seen twice before —she had no control over what kind of plays her clients picked to attend—but she hid that fact from Bittner, and tried to act as though it was the first time she had heard the songs or laughed at the

gags. When they left the theater at eleven, they were walking hand-in-hand.

"I'd suggest a nightcap," he said, "only I don't know how late I'm allowed to keep you out."

"Don't worry. I sleep till all hours of the morning," Laura said. She realized at once she had made a mistake, even before he reacted.

"Doesn't your boss mind that?" he asked.

She forced a brittle laugh. "Oh, I mean I can sleep till eight or so. The office is just a couple of blocks from my apartment. And I only need a few hours' sleep to keep me going."

They stopped in for drinks, and, about midnight, Bittner took her home. He seemed surprised that a mere sub-editor should be living in such a handsome building in such a costly neighborhood, but he said nothing about it. They rode upstairs in the elevator. Laura wondered whether or not to invite him in. She wanted him desperately, but he did not seem to be the sort of fellow who would want to go to bed with a girl on a first date. Besides, if she kept him outside he might get the idea that her apartment was only one or two rooms, which would be within the budget of someone with her kind of job.

They paused hesitantly outside the door. He was smiling down at her from his height, not knowing what to say, and after a clumsy pause he managed to get out, "Well, it's been a wonderful evening, Laura."

"I'm glad, Dan. Maybe the day didn't start out so well for you, but at least it ended well."

"Will I be seeing you again?"

"I hope so," she said, meaning it more than anything she had said to anyone for a long time.

"Is your number in the book?"

She shook her head. "It's unlisted. Here, I'll write it down for you. The best time to call me is—oh, around three or four in the afternoon."

"At *home*?"

Another slip, she thought. Retrieving the fumble, she said, "Yes, I'm only at the office two-thirds of the day. I leave at three and finish my work at home."

"Nice work if you can get it. Can I have the office phone too?"

Laura tensed. "Sorry, no. The boss is death on personal calls during working hours."

"Okay. I'll phone you here." He hesitated again. "Goodnight, Laura."

"Goodnight, Dan."

He made no motion toward leaving. He teetered for a second, and then she moved toward him and he took her in his arms and put his lips to hers, and she kissed him hard, with tongue and breasts and thighs, and she felt his body jerk back in surprise at the passionate hunger of her kiss. But she did not release him, and he joined in her fervor. Only after a long moment did they separate. He looked dazed and shaken and bewildered.

"Goodnight," he whispered, and darted toward the elevator.

Smiling, Laura let herself into her apartment. She laughed out loud in sheer happiness. It had been a splendid evening, she thought. No sex, no groping under her skirt, no hands kneading her lust-stiffened nipples. Just pleasant companionship, two lonely

people making each other less lonely.

She thought of Spinelli then, and it made her uneasy. Spinelli would be furious if he knew. His girls weren't supposed to carry on little flirtations of their own. They were supposed to reserve all of their affection for the paying customers. Spinelli would hit the ceiling if he found out that on her day off Laura had indulged in a little innocent hand-holding with an unhappy young man.

But I'll keep on seeing him, she told herself determinedly. *He's the only decent man I've met since I came to New York, and I want to see more of him. Spinelli can't stop me. He doesn't own me. As long as I keep his customers happy, why can't I have a little happiness myself?*

She began to construct a little daydream. Dan Bittner was obviously on the verge of falling in love with her, she thought. Perhaps he would ask her to marry him. And she would accept, and would tell Spinelli the end of her employment had come. She would go to live with Dan in his little apartment, somewhere, and they would have children, and he would never know or need to know of her past. She would simply stuff the experiences and sins of the past several months into a compartment of her mind that she would never open.

It seemed pretty enough—the little apartment, the babies, the domesticity. He needed someone to love him, and she needed love too. They were meant for each other, or so it looked.

But it's not fair, she thought. *He's a good kid. And what am I? I used to be a cheap whore, and now I'm an expensive one, but I'm still a whore. And*

someday maybe we'll go dancing and one of my old clients will recognize me, and while I'm in the powder room he'll go over to Dan and ask him if I'm still as good a lay as I used to be. Or maybe Spinelli will be angry because I'm leaving him, and to get even he'll send Dan a copy of his photograph album a week after the wedding. If Dan ever found out the truth about me, his whole world would collapse. And if I married him I'd live in constant fear that the truth would somehow be exposed.

All the same, when he called her a few days later, she greeted him warmly. It was four in the afternoon, and she was just beginning to dress for a dinner date she had that evening with a bachelor wheat magnate from Iowa, in town for a week and anxious to whoop things up with one of the bustier of Phil Spinelli's girls. She was going to wear the deep-cut dress, and the half-bra that seemed not to be there at all when she wore it.

"When are we going to see each other again?" Dan asked. "I'm free every night from now on."

Laura thought fast. "How about Tuesday? That's a good night for me."

"Why not Saturday?"

"No, sorry, Dan. No can do. I'm—busy."

He sounded hurt. "Well, Tuesday will have to do for me, then. Suppose I pick you up at your place and we'll take a drive out into Connecticut for dinner and a show?"

"Sounds fine," she said. "You make all the arrangements and anything you get will be great with me."

They talked a little while longer; he seemed

unhappy about what he assumed were other dates she had, but she eluded any direct questioning. *How can I tell him that I'll be working a convention over the weekend and serving as a bedwarmer for twenty or thirty middleaged lechers? Let him think what he wants. At least he won't ever know the truth.*

She arranged with Spinelli to take the following Tuesday off, and Dan picked her up at six. She was dressed a little daringly, that night, in a provocative off-the-shoulder blouse, and in his shy way Bittner goggled at the exposed square inches of bosom without making any specific comment. Laura smiled and kissed him as she got into his little foreign car.

"I've got reservations at a restaurant just off the Merritt Parkway," he told her. "And tickets for the Village Playhouse in New Canaan. They're doing Shaw tonight, *Man and Superman.*"

"Fine," she said. "I've never seen it."

She nestled close to him as he drove. The little car clung bumpily to the road, going up and down with every tar-line or pebble. They talked as he drove, mostly about him, his work, his impatience to have a second date with her.

He was definitely more forward than he had been on the first date, letting his hands rest lightly on her bare shoulders for a moment as he helped her off with her jacket, and holding her hand during the play and even slipping his arm around her. Considering how most of her escorts behaved, though, Laura could only regard him as almost comically reserved. It was a novelty, though, to have her body respected. A very pleasant novelty.

On the way home, though, there was a nasty jolt for her, one that nearly wrecked everything.

It was eleven o'clock, and Bittner had tuned in the news broadcast. The commentator, droning along, said suddenly, *"Police are continuing to probe the so-called Hotelroom Murder Case, and several suspects are being questioned as a result of the discovery of the strangled body of Marilyn Rivers, twenty-two, in a hotel room on West 57th Street early this morning—"*

"Oh, God!" Laura gasped.

"—informants suggested that the dead woman, allegedly a prostitute, was strangled by a customer after a quarrel over payment. Residents of the hotel heard shouting coming from the room shortly after midnight, and a 'tall, heavy-set' man reportedly was seen in the hotel just afterwards. Meanwhile, in juvenile court this afternoon—"

Laura reached out and snapped the radio off. She was shaking uncontrollably.

"What's the matter?" Bittner asked, startled by her behavior.

"That—that news bulletin. The murder in the hotel room—" Laura sobbed without tears. She could not speak.

Growing more astonished, Bittner said, "Didn't you hear about it before? It was in all the afternoon papers, and on the radio—"

"I didn't see them."

"Well, anyway, why are you so upset? Honestly, Laura, you look like you've just lost your best friend or something."

The savage, if unintentional, irony of his words

struck home deeply. Laura looked away, burying her face in her arm, and fought her way back from the edge of hysteria inch by inch, telling herself that she had to regain her self-control, *had* to, *had* to . . .

After a moment she said in a hollow voice, "I don't know what happened to me. I guess I was just struck with pity. Some poor girl trying to scrape up a living taking men to a hotel room, and one of them strangling her because it was easier than paying her the five dollars she wanted from him—"

"It happens all the time, sweet. These street-walkers never know when they're likely to get slashed or strangled or beaten up. There are some men who actually enjoy beating them up, you know." He slipped one arm around her shoulders, driving with the other. "Don't be so upset, though, honey. After all, people die every day. And this girl wasn't anything society needed. She was probably full of disease, and stupid and ugly besides, and—"

"Stop it."

"But—"

"Stop it! Stop it!"

Bittner was growing more and more confused. "Honey, I wish I knew what got into you all of a sudden. Sure, I feel sorry for that girl too, but you're carrying it a little too far, aren't you?"

"Maybe I am," Laura forced herself to say. "I—I'm very tired, that's what it is. Overstrung."

"We'll be home soon. A good night's rest and you'll be as good as new."

They lapsed into silence. Laura heard the steady

pounding of her heart, and gradually her mind accepted the awful words. *How could I tell him?* she asked herself. *How could I explain that she WAS my best friend, that she picked me up off the street when I was sick, that she slept in the same bed with me, that she was good and kind to me? How could I let him know that the girl he loves had been a friend of a skinny little whore who was murdered in a dirty hotel room?*

There was no way she could explain to him the reason for her outburst—no way that he could accept, at any rate. She grew calmer, and a feeling of pity replaced the earlier horror at the news.

They parted quickly at Laura's door. Bittner made no attempt to come inside. They kissed, but it was without the fervor of their first. Then he smiled and was gone, and she let herself into the apartment.

Switching on the television set, she picked up a late newscast. They were going over the murder story again. They showed a tattered snapshot of Marilyn, her own photo from her wallet. She looked thin and harried in the photo; it was a good likeness. They showed a photo of the room, with the sheet-covered body on the bed. They discussed the various suspects who had been rounded up. That was all. By tomorrow, the suspects would be released, the murder forgotten. The law did not waste much energy solving the murders of whores.

Laura shut off the set and poured herself a stiff drink. She felt overwhelmed with sorrow and guilt, guilt for having failed to keep her promise to Marilyn. They had not spoken since the first

week of her employment by Spinelli. And now they never would again. It had been almost inevitable, Laura thought, that Marilyn would end this way, snuffed out, her troubles over. She was so fragile, the night so dark, her clients so brutal.

And now she was dead. Laura downed her drink and prepared for bed. It had been awkward, then, when two of her worlds had impinged, when her grief for Marilyn had startled the man who thought she was innocent. Confusion made Laura's head buzz. She realized now that she was in love with Bittner—who quite probably thought she was a virgin.

I'll destroy him if I don't break up with him now, she thought. *If he ever learns how I've strung him along, he'll be crushed. It's a cruel world. A cold, nasty world where people set traps for themselves, themselves and each other. Some people sell themselves, others buy—and the good people, the innocent people, somehow they get caught up in it all and are ground to bits.*

God help us, she thought. *God help us all.*

CHAPTER TEN

THERE WAS NOTHING ABOUT MARILYN in the paper the next day. It was yesterday's murder, already stale. And, in any event, it was a very small tragedy, meaning nothing to anyone, except for one mourner at the other side of the city who could not tell anyone why she felt grief for an unimportant dead whore. Laura flipped bleakly through the papers and, finding nothing, threw them away. Marilyn had ceased to matter to the world.

The worst of it all, Laura thought, is that the victim didn't necessarily have had to been Marilyn. It could have been any of the girls who worked the 59th Street-Central Park region.

It could have been me, she thought with a little quiver of horror.

It could have been, so easily. Unbidden, the scene formed on the screen of her imagination. There she was, dressed shabbily—not the way she dressed these days—standing in front of the park, waiting, waiting. It was late in the day; she had a few dollars in her handbag, and she was tired and sweaty from a long day's work. As the twilight shadows fall, a client approaches—a big man in a stevedore's cap, hulking, unshaven. She wants to refuse him, but he is insistent, picking her up with a quick line, plenty of filthy words. They go to the hotel. He orders her to undress, standing back and admiring the pink-tipped globes of her breasts, the white soft skin of her thighs, the gently rippling

flesh of her full buttocks. He drops his trousers: he throws himself down on her, squeezing her tender breasts with calloused hands, thrusting his body against her, taking her with brutal speed and lack of tenderness.

And then, afterward, rising from her naked body with his lust satisfied, he reaches for her handbag, takes out the money she had earned that day. From the dresser, he takes the bill he had given to her only a few minutes before. She rises, protests, shouts shrill abuse at him. He laughs, turns toward her with a cruel smile on his face, seizes her. Thick fingers bite into the soft flesh around her throat. The heavy paws contract. She claws at the tightening hands, unable to remove them, and he shakes her like a doll, and the pain goes ripping down like a red-hot ingot thrust into her breasts, like a bolt of lightning in her loins, and her legs grow weak and her eyes begin to bulge and she hears his booming laughter as life slowly ebbs from her . . .

Laura shuddered.

It might have been me. Marilyn used to talk about perverts who enjoyed hitting or choking prostitutes. I was lucky, that's all. I got out in time, into a different league where they don't play so rough.

The telephone rang. Laura snatched it up eagerly, grateful for anything that would serve to interrupt her mood of morbid depression.

It was Spinelli.

"How's my favorite redhead this morning, eh?"

"Surviving," Laura said cheerlessly. She wasn't in a mood to make conversation.

"That's all? Just *surviving?* Chick, you know it's against the house rules just to *survive*. You've got to live, live, *live!*"

"Not today, Phil. I'm not in a very lively mood, I guess."

"After a day off?"

"I'll perk up. I—I've got a headache. That's it, a terrible headache."

"You going to be okay by tonight? Take some aspirin, or something. You've got to be your old sparkling self this evening."

"Where am I supposed to be working?"

"Hotel Whittier. There's a banker named McDermott in Suite 1411 who wants company."

"Dinner date?"

"No," Spinelli said. "You go to his room around nine o'clock. No dinner, no show. As long as you've got a headache, it's just as well that way, yes?"

"I suppose so," Laura agreed. "You know anything about this McDermott that I ought to know?"

"Not much. Just that he's loaded with dough, and you stand to pick up a nice bit of change. The last time I supplied him with a girl, he tipped her two bills. I'm not guaranteeing a repeat, but keep it in mind."

"Don't worry, I will!"

"He's going to be in town for a week," Spinelli added. "When he contacted me, he implied that he might be interested in making use of the same girl for several nights. Be nice to him and you may have earned yourself a fat piece of change by the time the week's over."

Spinelli hung up. Laura walked to the window and stared out onto the river. She thought about Dan. He was so good, so gentle—and in for such a shock when and if he found out the truth.

Maybe there's a way out, she thought. *Maybe I can slide out of this filthy profession and talk Dan into moving far away, to San Francisco maybe, or Seattle, or someplace else thousands of miles from here. Thousands of miles from these terrible memories.*

She went into the bathroom and stripped for her morning shower. Her body, reflected in the full-length mirror against the bathroom door, looked young and vibrantly healthy. Her breasts seemed to have grown more ripe since the loss of her virginity; the two full globes jutted proudly forward, heavy bowls of soft flesh tipped with dark reddish-pink. It was a wide-hipped, strong body she had. A woman's body, a body built for childbearing, with those big breasts and broad hips.

But call-girls don't have children, she thought.

They take precautions. And in the rare instances when the precautions fail, they employ the best abortionists money can buy to deal with the little accident. Spinelli kept a little book in which he recorded the dates of each of his girls' menstrual periods, and when the period started getting a couple of days overdue he began asking questions, and if it got as much as ten days overdue he would whisk the girl off to his doctor for an examination and tests. Spinelli didn't want any of his prize livestock being put out of commission for a year or so by a pregnancy. He didn't want to run the risk

that childbirth would alter the firm roundness of a valuable pair of breasts, or paint blue vein-lines on a much-admired pair of thighs. He didn't want his girls busy with diapers and perambulators when they should be earning money.

No, Laura thought. Call-girls don't have children.

She wondered what it would be like to have life swelling in her womb, to have her breasts grow stiff and heavy with milk, to experience the hundred inner changes of pregnancy. She wondered what it would be like to be the mother of Dan's children.

I could swing it, she thought. *It's only three months since McCarten raped me. I could manage somehow to forget all the things I've done in those three months. I could wipe the slate clean and start all over again, fresh . . . with Dan . . .*

She stepped under the shower, setting the controls for a fine needle-spray of cold water. The little needles lanced her skin with exquisite pinpoint pain. The trick, she thought, was to get out—to draw the line and say, After tonight no more, and to stick with it. To resist the lure of the $500-a-week salary and the hundred-dollar tips. To quit before it became too late ever to break the bond.

She had a good reason now. Dan. A decent, honest man who loved her, or who seemed to.

Get out now, she told herself. *You've got the best motive for quitting that you'll ever have, and you haven't been in it so long that it's changed you.*

She turned off the water and left the shower and towelled herself vigorously dry. Decision crystalized; she walked to the phone, grabbed up the

receiver, began to dial Spinelli's number, to tell him it was all over, that he would have to send some other girl to amuse Banker McDermott this evening at the Whittier.

She got as far as the second letter of Spinelli's telephone number. Then, weakening, she paused, staring at the dial.

What am I doing? she asked herself in horror. *Suppose Dan isn't interested in marrying me? I can't assume anything. I mustn't rush blindly ahead.*

Slowly, Laura replaced the receiver. Before she burned all the bridges that linked her with Spinelli, she would have to make sure of Dan's intentions. In the meantime, she would have to continue taking assignments as usual.

She walked through the livingroom, out onto her terrace, spread out her robe and lay down nude on top of it. At this hour of the day, the diagonal rays of the sun slanted over the terrace wall. No one could see her as she sunbathed here, and she had come to enjoy the daily hour in the sun.

Stretching out comfortably, Laura turned her breasts and loins to the sun and basked in the warm radiance. She had tanned quickly, all over her body. It gave her a pantherishly sensual appearance that attracted much approval from her clients. Men accustomed to women whose skins were fishbelly-white between their breasts and their thighs were delighted with Laura's golden-brown breasts and buttocks and belly.

After a while, she turned over, lying on her stomach while the sun caressed her buttocks. There in the warmth, all tension departed. She knew what

her direction was, now. As soon as she was sure of Dan's intentions, she would sever all connection with Spinelli. And they would go far, far away, and she would bear him children.

She even became reconciled to the death of Marilyn. The poor girl was out of her misery, now—no more walking the streets, no more days of humiliation and loneliness. Marilyn would have been a prostitute to the end of her days, and life would have become more and more of a bitter struggle for her as what little erotic appeal she had dwindled inexorably with the years. Now she was spared the anguish of age.

After an hour of sunbathing, Laura came in, feeling relaxed and glowing. Her maid had arrived and was tidying up the apartment. Laura prepared a light lunch for herself.

It was a relaxing day. She had awakened early, and she did not have to begin work until nine in the evening, so she had a full day for shopping and reading and decorating her apartment. She went out to eat around seven, dressed in slacks and a blouse, and had a light meal at a delicatessen on Second Avenue. By seven-thirty she was back in her apartment, and an hour and a quarter later she was in a taxi on the way to the Whittier and her rendezvous with Mr. McDermott.

The Whittier was an old-line hotel on Fifth Avenue, very elegant, very tasteful. Laura entered the lobby as though she were a visiting member of the Royal Family, as Spinelli had instructed her long ago. ("Never walk into a fancy hotel as though you're a whore, or they'll throw you out. Make them

think you're Queen Victoria herself and you'll get a warm welcome.")

Regally entering the elevator, Laura said in loftily sophisticated tones, "Fourteen, please."

The elevator boy practically bowed. The car rose swiftly.

The hallway was floored with plush carpeting that seemed to be a foot deep. Laura walked briskly along the corridor, watching the numbers descend, until she came to 1411. She knocked.

The door opened. "Hello," McDermott said. "You're Laura, I take it?"

"That's right."

"I'm Robert McDermott. Call me Bob. And come in, do, come in!"

Laura stepped in and let McDermott help her off with her jacket. He was a man of medium height, probably about fifty; his hair was thin, and what there was of it was white, but his face was unlined and his pink cheeks were pleasantly plump. He had pale blue eyes and the friendly, open look of an aging cherub.

He hung up the jacket and turned to survey her. Laura had dressed well for the occasion, in a tailored suit over a tight silk blouse. Everything tasteful, nothing on vulgar display. When the time came for McDermott to see her body, he would see it, but she was determined not to flaunt acres of bare bosom at him as an appetizer beforehand.

"I've taken the liberty of ordering some liquor," McDermott said. "Would you care for a highball, Laura?"

"If you do."

"By all means! Will it be Scotch, rye, bourbon? I've got a very well-stocked little bar here, as you see. Or if you prefer some liqueur or brandy, we could ask room service—"

"Rye will do," Laura said, smiling. "And some ginger ale, please."

McDermott fixed the drink for her. She waited while he prepared his own.

"To a wonderful evening," she said, lifting the glass toward his.

"Amen to that," McDermott said. "Cheers."

She took a shallow sip. He drank more deeply. Putting the glass down, he stared with sudden intensity at her.

"How old are you?" he asked abruptly.

"Over twenty-one, Mr. McDermott."

"I should hope so. But not very far over, eh? And call me Bob. How old do you think *I* am, eh?"

"I'm sure I couldn't guess."

"I'm sure you can. Come on, girl, don't be so afraid of offending me! Take a guess!"

"Fifty?"

"Fifty-eight!" he crowed. "You wouldn't believe it, would you? Not a wrinkle on my face. If I still had my hair I could pass for forty, I bet." He took another deep gulp of the highball. "I'm still a young man in many ways," he said with sudden seriousness. "But my wife is an old woman. Two years younger than I am, but you'd think she was seventy. It's a terrible thing, Laura, when a wife grows old faster than her husband does. It's made my life miserable. Miserable."

Laura said nothing. She had been through this

sort of thing before—the unhappy middle-aged man who took almost as great a pleasure in baring his personal problems to his mistress-for-a-night as he did in making love to her. The best tactic, she had discovered, was to remain sympathetically silent. Men love a good listener.

McDermott went on, "We've been married thirty-six years. Can you imagine that? I married her the day I graduated from Harvard. Look—here's her picture, one that I took in the spring of that year. Tell me what you think of her."

McDermott groped in his wallet and delicately pulled out a snapshot. Laura took it from him. It was old and faded, turning brown with the years, but the smiling girl it showed still had kept the beauty of that day nearly forty years ago. She was slender, with a classic serenity of feature and elegant posture.

"She's lovely," Laura said quietly.

"Yes. *Wasn't* she? Take a look at this one now. On a cruise ship in the Caribbean last winter."

The second picture showed McDermott and an elderly woman standing at the rail of the ship. McDermott, wearing a polo shirt and Bermuda shorts, looked gay and youthful. But the woman—!

It was possible to detect the underlying features of the girl of that time-browned snapshot. But only barely possible. Thirty-six years had wrapped a layer of wrinkled, sagging flesh around the classic chin. They had rounded the square shoulders, had thickened the Grecian nose, had made coarse flabby lumps of flesh out of the smiling lips. The eyes had lost their sparkle; the hair was frizzy and unkempt. The woman looked like McDermott's mother, not his wife. Laura

shuddered.

"It's hard to believe," she whispered, as she gave the picture back.

"Of course, it's a lot more striking to you, seeing the two pictures side by side. I've watched it happen gradually, so I'm not as rocked by the contrast. But it's an awful thing. Awful." He gulped down his drink. "How about a refill?"

"Not yet, thanks," Laura smiled. "I've still got a way to go on this one."

"Of course. Mind if I—?"

"Not at all," Laura said.

As he prepared a second drink for himself, McDermott said, "We've got three children. Bob Junior, he's thirty-three, a vice-president at the bank. A little too snobbish, but otherwise a fine boy. And my son Richard, he's thirty, an Air Force officer. Joined the ROTC in college and liked it so well he made a career out of it. I don't see much of him. The girl's name is Elaine. She's twenty-seven, I think. Her husband's a professor at Yale. What a bitch she is! I think she's slept with half the student body in New Haven. Well, that's her business—hers and her husband's. But those are my children. There was a fourth one, too. Donald. Also an Air Force man. Killed in Korea, he was. He'd be almost twenty-nine, if he'd lived. My wife turned into an old woman the day we got the telegram about him from the Defense Department." McDermott scowled. "Well, I was upset too. But it's almost eight years, now! I'm used to the idea that Don is dead. Elizabeth isn't. She still wakes up at night and goes into his room." McDermott looked up, sudden anguish in the baby-

blue eyes. In a hoarse voice he said, "Do you know how long it's been since my own wife has slept with me? Not since the day Don died. Not since the middle of the Korean War. You probably weren't even going to High School yet, back then. And she hasn't let me touch her since that day. Not that she'd been any ball of fire in the bedroom for years. Not that she ever was. You know how New England girls are raised, or at least how they *were* raised back then? The mothers tell them that sex is evil. They tell them that no good woman possibly can enjoy sex. They tell the girls to sleep with their husbands and make children, but once the children are all born you don't have to sleep with the dope you married any more. God, I'd like to strangle that old bitch, Elizabeth's mother!" McDermott shook his head heavily. "I'm talking too damn much, I guess."

"I don't mind," Laura said softly. "If it makes you feel better to get these things off your chest, I don't mind listening at all."

"You're a good girl," McDermott said. His voice was getting a little thick, and his pink face was growing flushed. Laura suspected that he had begun drinking long before her arrival. "You see why I live for these visits to New York? I can't do anything up in Boston, oh, God, no! If I ever got caught there, they'd practically crucify me on the Common. But four times a year I come to New York and I can live again." His eyes sought hers eagerly. "Four times a year I can have some genuine affection and sympathy. Sure, I have to pay for it, but that's better than not having it at all."

He gulped down the second drink and put the

glass on the table. "Don't let me have any more," he said. "I want to stay sober enough to appreciate you. You're a very beautiful girl, Laura. I need some beauty in my life. I earn a hundred thousand a year, you know? More than some people make their whole lives. And I'm unhappy. Funny, isn't it?"

"Money doesn't always make people happy."

"Damn right it doesn't! I see these people who work for me—tellers, they make $60 a week maybe. And they go home to their wives and lay them every night. Every goddam night!" He reddened. "Sorry if I get a little coarse. It's the drinks. But these people, they bang their wives all night long, on their lousy $60 a week. It's all they have, is fun in bed, but I don't even have that. I just have my Cadillac and my big house and my coupons to clip and my stone-cold bitch of a wife. Come here, Laura."

She put her glass down and walked across the room toward the couch. He rose, a little unsteadily, as she came close.

He let his hands rest lightly on her shoulders, and smiled at her.

"While I was waiting for you," he said, "I made up my mind that I wasn't going to exploit you tonight. We both know why you're here, but I promised myself I wouldn't hop into bed with you before eleven o'clock at the earliest. I'd show some restraint. I'd sit around and make polite conversation, and pretend that we were good friends who had known each other for years. But I can't do it. It isn't even ten o'clock, but I can't hold out."

Laura smiled tenderly. "I understand," she said. "I really believe you do. Let's go into the bed-

room, shall we?"

They went in together, hand in hand. Laura felt a tremendous wave of pity for this man, this millionaire whose life was so lonely. She almost forgot that this was a cold business transaction, that he was buying her for a night at a fixed price. She felt almost like an angel of mercy, performing an act of kindness.

They stood by the bed, and she pressed her body against his and he kissed her, hesitantly at first, then more passionately as his desire mounted and his natural reserve diminished. She realized he was hesitant, and she took his hands and put them on her blouse, and he cupped her breasts for a moment before beginning to unbutton her. He removed her blouse and, with shaking hands, unhooked her bra, and she heard his little sharp indrawn hiss of delight at the first sight of her bare breasts. He kissed her stiffening nipples tenderly.

"Lovely," he muttered. "Lovely."

She helped him undress her, and within moments further she was nude and he was undressing too. His body was fleshy without being fat; he had obviously taken pains to keep himself in trim, and it certainly did not seem like the body of a man of fifty-eight.

Naked, they embraced, and he carried her down to the bed.

"Be kind to me, Laura," he whispered. A little shuddering sigh of longing burst from him, and with sudden frenzy he clasped her, his hands gripping her breasts tightly, and she surrendered to him. He gave one deep-throated gasp of delight and uncontrollable desire, and almost immediately reached his release and sank down limply between her breasts, his breath

coming in harsh bursts, and he said apologetically, "It happened so fast, Laura. It happened so fast!"

She stroked his back consolingly.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THEY RESTED FOR A WHILE, and then, about an hour later, vigor returned to him and they began to make love again. This time McDermott's lust was less urgent, his passion more easily restrained, and their lovemaking lasted longer. When it was over, McDermott switched off the light and they got under the covers. He curled up against her, his face nestling in her bosom, his mouth pressed to one hard little nipple. Within moments he was asleep. Laura smiled at him in the darkness, this unhappy man at her breast, old enough to be her father but nestling there as though he were her child. She adjusted her body to fit his; he muttered something unintelligible and she joined him in sleep.

At half past seven the next morning, the room telephone rang. Laura swam up rapidly through layers of sleep, and nudged McDermott awake.

"The phone," she said.

"Answer it," he mumbled.

"No," she said. "It wouldn't be right. You'd better get it."

He nodded dimly and, leaning across her body, picked it up. After a moment, he said, "Thank you," and replaced the receiver. "It was the desk," he explained. "I asked them to phone me early so I wouldn't miss my appointments." He sat up on the edge of the bed, thumbing his eyes. A golden-gray stubble had sprouted on his cheeks. He looked rumpled and older, now, in the morning. He smiled

at her. "Christ, but you're a vision, Laura. Lying there with that red hair all over the pillow, and all your skin showing. You're the only woman I've ever known who could look beautiful at half past seven in the morning." He leaned over, planting a kiss just below her navel. Squeezing her thighs affectionately, he rose and shambled off toward the bathroom. Laura heard the shower running, and then, a little while later, there was the sound of an electric razor. When McDermott came out, he looked much more capable of facing the morning. But his eyes were bloodshot.

"The annex is yours, my dear," he said airily.

Laura showered quickly, just to refresh herself a bit. When she came out, pink and scrubbed, there was a towel around her, but McDermott made her remove it. "Delicious," he said. "Delicious. I'd rather eat you for breakfast than a grapefruit. What lovely skin you have. Elizabeth had skin like yours . . . once." He scowled. "I keep talking about her. I must be boring you."

"Do you have many important appointments this morning?" Laura asked.

"Oh, God, yes. I've got to be at the Chase Manhattan by half past nine, and then there's lunch with the Morgan Guaranty fellow at noon, and after that —" He shook his head. "It's a busy life, this business of money managing. But I suppose other people work just as hard, with a good deal less of a reward." He took a starched shirt from a drawer. "Will you join me for breakfast at the hotel coffee shop?" he asked.

"Of course," she said.

No one looked askance at them as they rode down together and went into the handsomely-ap-

pointed coffee shop. It was a *very* dignified and conservative hotel—which meant that the guests were free to do as they pleased, so long as they did it in a dignified and conservative manner.

Over coffee, McDermott said, "I'd like to see you again tonight, Laura. Is it possible?"

She shrugged. "If it were up to me, I'd say yes. But I don't arrange my own assignments. You'll have to—go through channels." She did not like to mention Spinelli by name.

McDermott smiled faintly. "All right. I'll try to arrange it. You're a very wonderful girl, do you know that, Laura?"

"I enjoy making people happy," she said.

"You've made me *very* happy. And I'm looking forward to spending much more time with you. But just in case your schedule doesn't permit me to see you again, I'd like to give you something just as a little token of gratitude for the wonderful time you gave me last night." He reached into his jacket pocket and produced a sealed envelope. He slid it along the table to Laura, who slipped it into her purse without looking at it at all, smiled, and murmured a "Thank you."

They parted, then, McDermott entering a taxi to take him downtown to the financial district, Laura hailing a cab to take her eastward to her apartment. Only when she was home did she open McDermott's envelope. Wrapped in a blank sheet of Whittier stationery, she discovered three crisp, fresh hundred-dollar bills.

She gasped. Three bland, smiling images of Benjamin Franklin's face looked up at her.

It was a phenomenal tip for a night's work. Even if she saw McDermott again tonight and he gave her nothing additional, she would have no cause to complain about a lack of generosity. It meant that at the very least she would have $800 this week. Money ceased to have meaning when it cascaded in at such a rate. She closed her eyes, thinking of her burgeoning bank account, wondering whether she would ever find the courage to break away from so lucrative a way of life.

Shortly after noon, Spinelli called.

"You must really have bowled McDermott over," he said. "He phoned in giving an enthusiastic report on you, and practically demanding that I let him have you for the rest of the week."

"What did you tell him?"

"I had you lined up for the camera convention tonight and tomorrow," Spinelli said. "But McDermott was practically drooling into the receiver, so I've made some switches. Tania and May will work the convention, and you'll be with McDermott tonight and tomorrow, and maybe the day after that if he's still in town. I figure it doesn't hurt to please him a little extra. He's got plenty of influential friends."

"Okay," Laura said. "What time tonight?"

"He wants to take you to dinner. Be there around six, I guess. Did he give you a tip last night?"

"He sure did," Laura said.

"How much?"

"Three," she said.

Spinelli was silent for a moment. Then he whistled and said, "You sure *must* have impressed

him. What did you do, mix Spanish Fly in your perfume?"

"I listened to all his troubles, and then I went to bed with him," Laura said. "That puts me one notch up on a psychiatrist. *They* just listen to your troubles."

Spinelli laughed. "I think I ought to tell you that McDermott isn't the only one who's been raving about you. Your public is wild about you, kid."

"I'm flattered, I suppose."

"You ought to be. And—just between you and me—you may be in for a little elevation of the base salary, if you keep going the way you've been going. How does it feel to be rich, huh?"

"I don't mind at all."

"Maybe you'd rather be in the chorus line on Ed Sullivan's show?"

"Thanks all the same, Phil. I'll stay where I am."

"Smart girl. You know what's good for you."

Hanging up, Laura bit her lip. So Spinelli was thinking of giving her a raise! Pretty soon she would be the top attraction on his list, that meant. She was already the best-looking girl in his organization, and as she gained in poise and sophistication she was increasingly in demand among the rich clients Spinelli served. A raise would make it harder and harder for her to give up the life. If she went to $600 a week—why, that was $30,000 a year! And tips were averaging four or five hundred a week more. A few years of income on that scale and she would be independent for life, if she invested her earnings wisely.

At half past three that afternoon there was a call from Dan.

"I've been trying to reach you for two days," he said. "I phoned around dinnertime yesterday, but there was no answer."

"I was out," she said.

"You're a hard girl to find, sometimes. When am I going to see you again?"

"When would you like to?"

"Tonight?"

She paused. "I'm sorry, Dan. Tonight's out. I —have a tremendous amount of work to catch up on."

"Tomorrow, then?"

She thought of McDermott. Sadly she said, "I hate to do this to you, honey. But I'm going to be busy tomorrow too, and most likely the day after."

"Catching up on important work?" The sarcasm in his voice was only faintly disguised.

"Yes," she said.

"Listen, honey, you don't have to try to soften things. If you're dating somebody else those nights, you can come out and tell me the truth. I won't fold up and die."

"I'm working, Dan," she said. "Honestly." *It's the truth, isn't it?* she asked herself savagely.

"All right. Have it your way. I'm not going to try to force myself on you."

"Look, Dan—darling—believe me, I'd give anything to be able to see you the next couple of nights. But I can't. Absolutely. It's impossible to explain, but I—I can't."

"Okay," he said mildly. "I told you, I'm not out to force the issue. But I do want to see you. I've some very important things to discuss with you. In person."

"Monday?" she said.

"Monday's fine. Pick you up at six or so for dinner?"

"Swell, darling!"

"Till Monday, then." He blew her a kiss. She returned it, and they hung up.

Immediately she phoned Spinelli and requested a day off for Monday. He was reluctant, but she pinned him down to the admission that she was entitled to several more days off that month, and that he had not scheduled her yet for anything beyond the weekend.

"How come it's so important?" he asked.

"It isn't, really. Just that I feel like taking a breather."

"You had a breather just a couple of days ago. You seem awfully eager for another one."

"I've got some things to catch up on, Phil."

"Oh? Say, now, you aren't involved in anything on your own, are you? You know I don't take much to free enterprise in this organization."

"Would I jeopardize myself by anything as dumb as that?" she asked angrily.

"Women do peculiar things when they think they're in love," Spinelli said with calm menace in his voice. "We've been getting along swell, Laura. I wouldn't want you to mess up a splendid arrangement."

"All I want is a day off on Monday, Phil. If you're going to imagine all sorts of wild affairs—"

"Okay. Okay. Take Monday off," Spinelli said brusquely. "I withdraw all insinuations. Friends?"

"Friends," she said.

When she put down the phone, she felt a sharp pang of guilt and fright. *I'm getting into this thing deeper and deeper,* she thought. Spinelli, who was anything but a fool, was beginning to get suspicious. It would be only an elementary precaution now for him to station a detective on her tail to watch her afterhours activities. Spinelli would find out about Dan that way.

She knew what would happen. Spinelli would do nothing to her—not directly. But Dan would be visited one night and the facts of life would be explained to him, perhaps with a baseball bat, perhaps with a knife. And she would be told quietly not to make a second mistake.

She had lied to Dan, and she had lied to Spinelli. The tangle of her lies was increasing—perhaps, she thought bleakly, it would soon weave itself into a noose for her throat. Dan had to talk to her about "something personal," and she had a good idea that it meant something to do with a ring. But how would she elude Spinelli's vigilance? How would she ever break free of him? She was too valuable now for Spinelli to let her go without an effort. And he could so easily keep her, simply by telling the truth about her to Dan.

There was no way out.

There was nothing to do but live from one day to the next, and hope against hope that—somehow—everything would turn out all right.

Fear and despair chilled her. Spinelli was urbane and amiable, but the urbanity was only a mask for the ruthlessness beneath the surface. She could not hope to defeat him in any sort of struggle.

The wise thing would be to give up Dan, thus avoiding the conflict with Spinelli and the chance of harm to him or of possible exposure. But she could not give him up. He was the one chance she had—perhaps the only one she ever would have—to escape into a decent life. He was the first man she had known who tried neither to buy her nor to rape her. He was the only one who regarded her as a human being, not as a two-legged sex machine. She loved him for that.

She loved him.

But she dreaded what was coming.

She forced all thoughts of the dilemma from her mind, and began to dress for the evening. Since it was a dinner date, and a second date as well, she dressed more daringly, in a gay and provocative gown whose neckline actually cut *below* her breasts, leaving only a filmy band of gauze and lace to cover the bosom. There was a special bra to go with the outfit, one that embraced her nipples and hugged the lower curves of her bosom. She had never worn the gown in public; with a jacket, though, it seemed moderately decent, and a really high-class restaurant would be accustomed to such a dazzling display.

McDermott was impressed. He was ready, immaculate in formal tuxedo, when she knocked at his door at five after six that evening. He kissed her hand, and then—to the accompaniment of her delighted giggles—lightly kissed her exposed bosom. "Won't you be arrested in a gown like that?" he asked.

She smiled. "This isn't Boston."

"I know. But it isn't Bali either!"

The waiter, though, kept his eyes modestly averted as she swept into the restaurant on McDermott's arm. It was a Park Avenue restaurant so costly that even she had only been there once before, and McDermott had reserved a table that placed them practically in the center of the room, where all eyes were drawn to the milky loveliness of Laura's bosom.

She enjoyed the attention. Holding her cocktail aloft, she would lean forward, until her breasts came within an ace of popping out of their confinement altogether, and she could almost hear the *oohs* and *ahhs* all over the restaurant. McDermott, smiling, seemed to drink her with his eyes. He told her at least a dozen times how happy he was that she could join him for a second night.

It was a long meal. There were innumerable entrees and cocktails, and with the main dish came rare wine, and with the coffee there was cognac. Laura felt mildly dizzy, even though she had eaten sparingly and left her wine unfinished. She felt tremendously relaxed and happy, except for the one nagging thought that if she married Dan she would probably never eat at a place like this again, where the menu did not deign to make mention of price, and where a dinner for two could easily run to sixty or seventy dollars.

In the taxi on the way back to the Whittier, McDermott turned to her and kissed her, his tongue gliding into her mouth and his hand seeking beneath the lace until it came to rest cupping the warm, soft bulk of her breasts. Only when he attempted to slide one hand under her dress did she stop him. The taxi

driver was covertly watching in his mirror, she was sure. Delicately Laura took McDermott's hand away from her thighs, and they straightened up. "We don't want to look sloppy in the hotel lobby," she whispered, and he nodded and smiled.

Once they were in the room, though, there were no such restraints. He pulled her tight against him, grinding his loins against hers, and while one hand cupped her breasts the other ducked under the hem of her gown in back, swooping upward and into her panties to grip the cool flesh of her buttocks. They remained glued together for a long moment, McDermott finally breaking away. He looked flushed and excited. Laura wondered distantly whether he might not have a weak heart. So much excitement would be dangerous for him, then. And it would be awkward if he happened to have a heart attack while she was with him.

He was on the phone, now, telling Room Service to send up champagne. "The Piper Heidseick '52 *Cordon Rouge*," he specified.

An impressive-looking official brought the champagne up fifteen minutes later, in a bucket on a tray, and he made a big production out of removing the cork. Pouring out a glass for each of them, he bowed and departed. McDermott offered Laura her glass, and they clinked them gravely and drank.

Putting his glass down empty, McDermott said in a peculiarly halting, hesitant way, "Laura—I—I've been doing a good deal of thinking since last night—about—about things." He looked down at his gleaming black shoes. "I—I'm rather fond of you, as you might imagine. I was wondering if—perhaps—

you could possibly be persuaded to move. To Boston, or one of the suburbs."

She looked at him in surprise.

Before she could reply, he went on, "I have a fairly good idea of what you earn here, and I could guarantee that you'd live equally well up there. And you'd be free most of the time, except when I could manage to see you. We'd have to arrange things very carefully, of course. A breath of scandal and I'd be ruined." He looked up, pale and tense. "There's one additional angle. My wife, as I've said, has aged rapidly. She's not in the best of health. Now, a divorce is beyond consideration, but—in the event of her death, say in the next year or two—I would ask you to become my second wife. After the proper interval of mourning, of course. Naturally this would entitle you to a considerable portion of my estate at such time—as—well—"

He paused. Laura looked at him in confusion.

"I don't know what to say," she got out finally. "I'm—well—stunned—"

"I admit it's sudden of me, this way. But I've searched my soul and I'm convinced I must have you. Your past is of no interest to me. I need you, Laura."

It was her turn to look at the floor. "Well—there are some complications," she said, thinking of Dan. No doubt Spinelli would be willing to release her from employment to make such a marriage, or even to become McDermott's mistress while Mrs. McDermott lived. "I'm afraid I can't give you any answer on the spot, Bob. I'd have to think about it a while."

"Certainly," he said, calmer now that he had said his say. "This isn't anything for you to rush

into. Consider it, and let me know your answer when you've reached a decision. For my sake, of course, I hope it'll be *yes*."

She looked away, moistening her lips. It was an idea, she thought. A lot depended on what Dan had to say Monday night. If he asked her to marry him, life would be a lot more complicated. But if he had no such intentions, then it might not be bad at all to become McDermott's mistress and possibly someday his wife and heir.

She smiled. "I'd like some more champagne, Bob."

"Certainly!"

He filled her glass. She drank quickly. She began to feel giddy. Without his telling her, she started to remove her clothing. When she was nude, he came toward her. She realized she was very close to being drunk. He took her in his arms, and she leaned against him as he carried her to the couch. She sprawled out limply, her arms around his neck, and he kissed her breasts, her eyes . . .

He sighed sharply as her cool hands touched his body, and then he was on fire, crushing her in his arms, thrusting his tongue between her teeth, and he brushed his fingers along her body and cupped her breasts, and she clenched herself to him and their bodies joined and this time he stayed with her all the way, until they went sweeping away together on a riptide of delight.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THEY MADE LOVE TWICE THAT NIGHT before McDermott, utterly sated, dropped off into sleep. The hotel desk woke them again at seven-thirty. When they parted, after breakfast, McDermott did not give her anything. Laura understood. It had nothing to do with the three hundred dollars he had given her the night before. It was simply that McDermott was a man of fastidious tastes, and he felt it was improper to offer crude cash to a woman you had asked to become your mistress and someday perhaps your wife. To slip her some cash that morning would be to destroy all he had asked for the night before. It would reduce her to the status of a whore again, albeit an elegant one, rather than a lover.

Laura returned to her apartment by ten. She took a nap, and was well rested by the time Spinelli phoned in the afternoon for a report on her activities of the night before.

She told him, in detail—including the proposition that she move to Boston.

"I know," Spinelli said. "McDermott brought it up yesterday. He wanted to know if I had any objections, and also how I thought you'd react to the idea. I told him to go ahead and ask you."

"*Do* you have any objections?"

Spinelli chuckled. "McDermott would recompense me amply if he took you out of my string. And it would be very useful to have you settled in Boston under his protection. No, no objections here.

Did he give you anything for last night?"

"No," Laura said, and explained why. Spinelli seemed to accept the theory without any particular hesitation or suspicion.

"Okay," he told her. "You'll be with him again tonight. He wants you for dinner at his suite around seven o'clock. He's also made arrangements to stay over in New York for at least another day. You'll be assigned to him for as long as he stays."

At seven, Laura reported to the Whittier for the third night in a row. McDermott received her in a costly-looking oriental dressing-gown. He had cocktails ready, and while she sipped hers he telephoned downstairs to have dinner brought in.

He had arranged for dinner to be prepared at a fine restaurant around the corner, and brought over specially. It was wheeled in, now, on a sumptuously laden tray—meats, vegetables, salads, all manner of delicacies, accompanied by the best wine. Laura was glad she had not bothered with lunch.

They were not finished eating until after nine. McDermott had the remnants of the meal removed, and as soon as they were alone he put his arms around her, drew her tight against him, clasped her tightly and kissed her.

"Have you been thinking about—what I asked you last night?"

She nodded. "Yes, I've been thinking about it, Bob. But I still can't give you any definite answer. Not for another few days."

"I'll be going back to Boston Saturday morning."

"I couldn't let you know before Tuesday," she said. So much depended on the meeting with Dan

Monday night. "Could you phone me at home on Tuesday? We'll be able to decide everything then."

"If I have to wait that long, I guess I have to wait," he said quietly. Gripping her hands, he whispered, "Don't fail me, Laura! I need you so very much, you know. More than I could ever tell you."

He began to undress her. When she was completely nude he knelt before her, gently kissing her soft flesh until he had reached her lips. They kissed deeply. Breaking away, he kissed her left breast in a way that sent tremors of excitement through Laura's middle. He toyed with the little nipple, while his hands roved the rest of her body. She began to pant as excitement rose in her.

He took his mouth from her bosom and cupped the heavy breasts in his hands while she undressed him. The tips of his fingers curved under the full globes, squeezing them tenderly. She throbbed in anticipation of delight. He was naked now, his bare body flattened against hers, his teeth nibbling at the lobe of her left ear while his hands caressed her bosom and back, and their harsh breaths mingled in one stream, and she began to draw him across the room toward the divan, a kiss at each step.

Then they were curled there in each other's arms, ready for love, hers long since on fire, and they kissed again, both of them coyly delaying the moment when their bodies would become one. He was talking, now, whispering passion-inspired words of love into her ear. He had learned quickly which places set her on fire, and he was making use of his knowledge.

"Take me," she murmured. "Don't wait any longer, Bob. Now. Bob. *Now!*"

She thrust toward him.

A key turned in the door.

They had only half a second to react, and in that time they were both so enflamed with desire and numbed with surprise that they did nothing. Then the door was flung wide open.

What seemed like an army poured in. Men in police uniforms, men in business suits, men with cameras, men with guns. Flashbulbs exploded. Laura heard her own voice screaming hysterically, wordlessly; she heard McDermott shouting angry curses, gutter abuse, violently vivid language.

A raid!

Stunned, the naked pair on the couch sprang up. Laura saw McDermott scowlingly pulling a robe around his nakedness. She herself had nothing to put on; she looked wildly around for a robe, a towel, anything, but there was nothing, and perhaps a dozen men were staring greedily at her bare breasts and thighs, their eyes alight with keen appreciation.

Finally someone gave her an overcoat. Dazed, she murmured, "What—what's going on?"

A towering man in business clothes glowered down at her. "What's your name?"

"Don't answer him!" McDermott shouted.

"Shut up, you," the big man snapped. Again to Laura he said, "I want to know your name."

"Lois Harper," she said quickly, using the name that had been her pseudonym in her streetwalking days. "But what is this, anyway?"

"This is a vice raid, lady. I'm Lieutenant Harkness of the vice squad, and you're being booked on a morals charge. *You,*" he said roughly to McDermott.

"Your name is Robert McDermott of Boston, now?"

McDermott looked shellshocked and crushed. He did not even seem to have the strength to bluster. "Yes," he said weakly. "That's my name."

"And who's this woman in your room?"

McDermott shrugged. "You ought to be able to figure that out for yourself."

"Answer my questions! Did you hire this woman for immoral purposes this evening?"

McDermott shook his head. "I don't have to say a word to you, friend. I intend to speak to my lawyer before I give any statements to the police. And let me tell you this, while I'm at it—before I'm through with you I'll bust you down to a beat cop."

"Listen to the wise guy! He's in so much hot water he's boiling all over, and he can still threaten!" the vice detective guffawed. "Listen, McDermott, you know who tipped us off? It was your *wife*. She wrote a letter asking us to check up on you because she suspected you were entertaining call girls when you took business trips. She wants divorce evidence, I guess. And so when the Chief ordered a city-wide crackdown for tonight, you were a natural. Especially when the bellboy told us you had young female company. And there the two of you are bare-ass, you and Miss Bigtits here. Don't threaten *me*, McDermott. You're in big trouble."

McDermott turned away, his face ashen, and sank down on the couch. Laura began to whimper hysterically. The suddenness of the raid, the flashbulbs, the huge army of men—there were more than a dozen of them—she was dazed and rocked by it. And her body, brought just to the pitch of desire

before the spectacular interruption, was aching now.

The policeman who seemed to be in charge said, "Ryan, keep an eye on the *lady* while she gets dressed."

"Gladly," a thin, beak-nosed man in uniform grinned.

He scooped up Laura's clothes, underwear and all, and handed them to her. She took them, still in a fog.

"Come on," he said. "Into the bedroom here and get into your things. We're in a hurry."

"What are you going to do with me?"

"Book you, of course."

She began to panic. "I've got to make a telephone call!"

"From the station," Ryan said. "Get into your clothes."

He shut the bedroom door and stood with folded arms. Laura stared at him.

"Aren't you going to turn your back?"

"And have you jump out the window or something? Uh-uh. Come on, kiddo. You've been selling it long enough. You can spare me a free look, now. Hurry it up."

Blushing a fiery red, Laura slipped off the overcoat they had put around her. Ryan's eyes were glued to her breasts as she hurriedly donned her bra. She dressed quickly, weak with fear and embarrassment, while Ryan leeringly watched her.

"Okay," he said when she was finished. "Shake your butt, will you? Everybody's waiting."

Fully dressed, she returned to the outer room. Most of the invaders had left. McDermott sat on the

couch, his head in his hands, sobbing brokenly. Feeling a sudden surge of pity, she started to go toward him, but Ryan caught her wrist and pulled her back.

McDermott looked up. His eyes were streaming tears. He tried to speak, but no words would come.

Laura said, "Don't worry, Bob—"

"Too late. Too late. Elizabeth's stinking spy has pictures of us. There'll be a divorce . . . a scandal . . . everything ruined . . ." He sobbed again, his whole body shuddering. He covered his face with his hands and slumped down.

"Come on," the police said to Laura.

"Where are you taking her?" McDermott demanded.

"To the station-house, to be booked on a morals charge. You want to come along?"

"I have to talk to my lawyer—"

"Talk to Phil," Laura whispered. "Tell him—"

The police hustled her out.

They went down via the freight elevator, which was some relief to Laura. After having been the object of much interest and admiration in the main elevators for the past three days, she did not want the humiliation of being seen in police custody.

The freight elevator opened onto the side street facing the hotel. A police-wagon waited there. One cop held Laura as though expecting her to break and run, while the other opened the back of the wagon. They thrust her in. The wagon started to move.

There were four other women in the wagon already, and they looked at her with blank curiosity. Two of them were Puerto Ricans, fleshless wiry little women wearing slips. A third, a big blonde, was

dressed only in a housecoat and a pair of panties. The housecoat was open, and her big, heavy breasts, full and pendulous as a cow's, hung out exposed, swaying and jiggling with every motion of the Black Maria. The fourth girl was a very young-looking negro, wearing a tight red sweater and a pair of black toreador pants. The Puerto Rican women seemed not to understand or to care about what was going on; the fat blonde did not appear to be very concerned, while the negress huddled in one corner of the wagon, obviously terrified and tearful.

The big blonde grinned at Laura. "They pull you outa that hotel?"

Laura looked at her feet, and said nothing.

"A snob, huh?" the blonde cackled. "Well, go screw yourself. I was just trying to be sociable."

"Please," Laura said. "I don't feel like talking."

"None of you broads feel like talking!" the blonde roared. "The spics don't understand, and this one is scared spitless, and you don't feel like talking. What the hell kinda whores are you, anyway?"

Laura said nothing. One of the Puerto Rican women looked up hesitantly and said, "*Donde estamos?*"

"I don't understand Spanish," Laura said.

The woman smiled. "*Por favor donde estamos?*"

"I don't understand," Laura repeated.

"She wants to know where we are," the negro girl said in a husky voice. "She's been asking that all the way downtown. She's never been south of 72nd Street before." Turning to the Puerto Rican, she said, "*Estamos cerca la calle numero cuarentidos.*"

The answer seemed to satisfy the Spanish-speak-

ing woman, who settled back in silence.

Perhaps fifteen minutes later, the wagon pulled up in front of the House of Detention in Greenwich Village. Police guarded the women carefully as the van was unloaded. Other wagons were parked nearby in the streets, indicating that there had been plenty of arrests in the last half hour.

As Laura marched up the steps and into the building, bright light exploded in her face. To her horror, she saw a little squad of press photographers just inside the door, getting shots of the girls as they came in. Spitting a curse, Laura threw up her arm to shield her face, hoping their pictures would not come out.

She was ushered inside. The place was brightly lit and ugly, with high, bare walls. A bored-looking desk sergeant booked the new arrivals in, explaining yawningly that they would be held in custody overnight and arraigned in the morning. Laura once again gave her name as Lois Harper, and she was led further into the building, to the cell blocks.

They put her in a big cell with four other women who had been picked up that evening. One was the negress, one the big blonde who had ridden with her in the wagon. The Puerto Rican women went into another cell. Laura's remaining two cellmates were a slovenly-looking redhead who seemed to be a friend of the blonde, and a tall, lean girl in blue jeans who kept to herself at the far corner of the cell. The metal door clanged shut. Far down the corridor, some woman was singing in a high-pitched, drunken voice. Further down, two women were arguing violently in Spanish.

Feeling strangely out of place in her elegant clothing, Laura huddled down on one of the hard cots. It was only midnight. There were many long, bleak hours yet to come before dawn.

She wondered what would happen now. They might send her to jail, she thought. Perhaps she would just get off with a fine. In any case, she was in trouble. Not so much trouble as McDermott, though. She pitied him terribly. No doubt there would be a messy divorce case, now. She would be named as co-respondent, and the pictures of her and McDermott in the nude would figure prominently in the trial, and his reputation would be blasted. Probably he had enough money to get along for the rest of his life, but his banking career would be effectively ended.

She settled down without undressing and tried to sleep. A short while later, she heard hoarse sounds coming from the other side of the cell, and looked up. It was the big blonde and the redhead. They had pushed their cots together and had stripped, and now they were lying with their heavy bodies entwined, their lips pressed together, making love. It was a disgusting sight. Laura remembered her own brief lesbian interlude with Marilyn, but she told herself it had been nothing like this. These were two heavybreasted cows of women, women in rut, grappling with each other to slake their revolting lusts. Big breasts quivered with desire; thigh locked around thigh. Laura closed her eyes, but she continued to hear their heavy grunting, to hear the sudden gasping insucking of breath as first one, then the other, arrived at a culmination.

It was a horrible night. Laura slept hardly at all, and every time she awoke it seemed that the two les-

bian prostitutes were at each other again, enjoying it mightily. She heard the slap of hands on buttocks, the sticky squish of one sweat-bathed body pulling away from another and approaching it again. When morning came, Laura's head throbbed mercilessly. She felt as though there were sand in her mouth, gravel where her eyeballs once had been. Her clothing was rumpled and dirty, and she needed a shower badly. She was hungry. She was frightened. She was miserable.

A burly policewoman came to the cell door about seven the next morning, looked in, and entered. The two lesbians were still asleep in each other's arms. The policewoman, grayhaired and iron-jawed, slapped them soundly on their exposed buttocks. "Here, you two disgusting chippies! Get up and separate those cots!"

She stalked out. The lesbians muttered angry curses after her, but separated.

At nine that morning the policewoman returned. Peering into the cell, she said, "Lois Harper, or Laura Haynes, or whatever you call yourself?"

"That's me," Laura said.

"Somebody to see you. Come on out."

Laura freshened up quickly at the little dirty washstand in the cell, while the policewoman opened the door. Laura followed her down the wide halls toward the offices at the front of the building. Feeling hopelessly rumpled and sloppy, she was ushered into a small waiting-room. A suave-looking man of about forty rose immediately to greet her.

"Miss Haynes?"

"Yes," Laura said uncertainly.

"My name is Brewer. Leon Brewer. I'm a legal

representative of Phil Spinelli." He dropped his voice to a hollow whisper when mentioning Spinelli's name.

Laura smiled wanly. "When did he find out I was here?"

"Last night, when Mr. McDermott called him. But there was nothing we could do to help you until this morning."

"What's going to happen to me?"

"Nothing. You're free," Brewer said, smiling loftily. "The city doesn't have a case against you. There's no proof you were soliciting, no proof you were receiving money. All they can definitely accuse you of is being present in Mr. McDermott's suite in —ah—a state of undress. In short, they could make trouble for you, but not very much, and in any event we've succeeded in having charges against you removed."

Laura understood. Spinelli had pull. Brewer had spoken a few magic words and they were letting her go. But all the other girls rounded up last night, the streetwalkers and whores who didn't have fancy legal assistance to help them, they would have to pay the fines and serve the workhouse terms for prostitution.

Don't complain, Laura thought. *At least you're free, aren't you? It's their hard luck that they don't have any pull.*

There were a few technicalities involved in her release. Within half an hour, she and Brewer stepped out of the House of Detention into bright morning sunlight. A black limousine pulled up.

Spinelli was inside. Laura and Brewer got in. Spinelli looked grim.

"Was there any trouble, Leon?" he asked.

"Not a bit," Brewer said. "I just explained that they had accidentally nabbed a Spinelli girl without realizing it, and they let her go with apologies."

"A damned good thing," Spinelli muttered. "I pay thousands a year for protection, and what happens? They pick up one of my own girls. Christ, I'm going to smash someone for this!" Suddenly solicitous, he said to Laura, "How do you feel?"

"Tired. Filthy. Scared as hell."

"Take a couple of days off. And don't worry about this thing. It was a big mistake. Some hotshot flunky wanted to have a morals raid, that's all. And McDermott's wife put a bug on him. It was just a lousy coincidence."

"What about McDermott?" Laura asked.

"Up the crapper, I'm afraid. He went back to Boston on a midnight train. You better forget any deals you might have been offered by him," Spinelli said. "He's going to need every cent he has, by the time his wife gets through with him. The lousy bitch."

Laura shuddered. "The poor man."

Shrugging, Spinelli said, "He could have avoided it. He should have paid a bellhop to look out for something like that. But he never thought it could happen to him. It always is a big surprise, when the bulls bust in. But it was his own damn fault."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE FIRST THING LAURA DID when she reached her apartment was to strip off her soiled and rumpled clothes and head for the shower. She paused to look in the mirror. She looked terrible. Her eyes were bloodshot and rimmed with dark circles. Her cheeks were hollow. Even her breasts seemed to droop a little.

The brisk shower revived her to some degree. At least she was clean, now. Naked, she walked numbly through the apartment, with all its beautiful furniture and expensive carpeting, and threw herself down in a heap on her bed. Her eyes throbbed mercilessly. She felt sick, sick with pity for McDermott and Marilyn and herself, for all the hapless whores rounded up and bundled into the House of Detention, for everyone who schemed and suffered for filthy lust.

After a while she began to doze off. She had had virtually no sleep at all, and she was exhausted. She thought fleetingly of Spinelli, that octopus of crime. He had saved her, and she supposed she should be grateful for that. But she realized suddenly that she hated Spinelli and everything he stood for. The merchant of high-priced sex, of blue-chip nookie. Always ready to work the fix to cover something up. Always ready with the glib talk, the smooth sales pitch, the big money. He bought and sold souls with his money. He was a new kind of villain, she thought—not the mustache-twirling kind with an evil leer, but a new Madison Avenue kind of villain, an Ivy League kind of villain, soft-spoken, dressing in perfect taste, eat-

ing at the finest restaurants. Handsome, affable, cultured. But just as evil as the most raucous gangster. More dangerous, in fact, since he cloaked his malevolence behind smooth phrases.

She dropped off to sleep, finally, still thinking of Spinelli. The ringing of the telephone brought her up out of it. She woke, listening to the bell ring for a third time, a fourth, a fifth. Frowning at her own nakedness, she stretched across the bed and picked up the receiver. The clock on the nighttable told her it was four o'clock; she had been asleep for hours.

"Hello?"

"So you work for a fashion magazine, eh? And you had important work to do last night?" The voice, Laura realized in astonishment, was Dan's. But it sounded different—thick, as though he had been drinking, and shaky.

"Is that you, Dan?"

"Yeah, it's me. Sucker Dan. The biggest dope this side of the Mississippi. Fashion editor, you are. I could have had a free lay from you, if I'd known. Fashion editor!"

"Dan—" Her voice was edged with fright. "Dan, are you drunk?"

"Maybe. You stinking whore!"

"Dan!"

"Go on, deny it, why don't you?"

"I don't understand—"

"Maybe it was your twin sister. You got a twin sister, Laura? Because she looked just like you. Right down to the last, she looked just like you. I didn't know you had a twin, Laura."

"What are you talking about?"

"The picture in the paper, Laura. On the front page of the *News*. You mean you didn't see it?"

She began to shiver. "N-no."

"Well, I saw it, Laura. My sweet little fashion magazine editor. My sweet little hand-holding girlfriend who was too busy to see me most of the time. My sweet little whore. So long, Laura. It just goes to show you you can't trust anybody in this world. . . not anybody. . ."

The phone clicked.

"Dan!" she cried.

The line was dead. With trembling hands, Laura replaced the receiver. She clung to the edge of the bed, racked with deep sobs. She was at the edge of hysteria. She fought for control.

After a moment she regained her inner balance. The first thing to do, she thought, was to get a copy of the newspaper and see just what sort of pictures they had used. She made her way into the kitchen and rang the house-phone several times, until the doorman answered.

"Howard," Laura said, "will you pick up a copy of today's *Daily News* and bring it up to my apartment as soon as you can?"

"Will do, Miss Haynes."

She waited. Ten minutes later, the doorbell rang. Laura started for it, realized she was still nude, and hastily grabbed up a robe and wrapped it around her. It was a thin, practically transparent robe, but there was no time to worry about that now.

The doorman, a young, massive West Indian, goggled in surprise at the immodesty of Laura's outfit as she answered the door. But he made no comment,

merely smiled and handed her the paper. She took it from him without unfolding it, and gave him a dollar.

As soon as the door was closed, she spread the paper out on the bed.

A headline screamed up at her from the front page:

ARREST 100 IN
VICE ROUNDUP

The entire lower half of the front page was given over to a single picture that had been taken from the doorway of the Detention building. It showed a file of women being shepherded into the building by policemen, with police wagons in the background.

Perhaps a dozen girls were shown in the picture. The one closest to the camera was Laura. It was the photo that had been taken of her while she was unawares. There was no mistaking the likeness. It was quite clear. She was staring expressionlessly right into the camera, and a policeman stood at her side with his hands grasping her arm at the elbow.

The caption said, *Vice squad man leads some of the more than a hundred prostitutes arrested last night into the women's house of detention. Story on page 3.*

Quickly Laura opened to page three. There, under a page-wide headline, were two more pictures of girls struggling with policemen. The article began,

The city's vice squad swooped down last night in a lightning raid on New York City prostitutes. The carefully-planned operation covered everything from cheap B-Girl bars to flossy midtown hotels, and by midnight had netted more than a hundred tarts. Ten wagons were needed to convey all the chippies to the hoosegow.

According to a Vice squad spokesman, this is only the beginning of an intensive campaign against the play-for-pay girls. Similar blitzkrieg raids will take place from time to time, and there will be increased surveillance of bars, hotels, and traditional street-corners. Another—

Laura threw the paper down. She had to fight back a wild burst of panic.

The worst had happened, then. The picture was in the papers, and Dan had seen it. He had drawn the inevitable conclusion.

Oh, God, she thought, *why did that photographer have to be there? Why did they have to take my picture? Why did Dan have to see the paper?*

Why?

The *why* didn't matter any more. What mattered was that Dan had seen it. And, obviously shocked, perhaps drunk, he had called up to accuse her—rightfully—of having perpetrated a horrible deception on him. Her head drooped in shame. To become emotionally involved with someone, perhaps to come to the point of wanting to ask her to marry you, and then to see her picture in the paper in a group of common prostitutes arrested in a vice raid—what a shock that must have been to him, she thought! And there was nothing she could do now, no way of calling him and telling him that it was all a mistake, that they had arrested someone who looked very much like her, or that they had really arrested her but through some gigantic error of justice.

No. Dan knew the truth. No lie would help now.

Laura picked up the telephone and dialed Spinelli's number. On the fourth ring it was Skalkottis,

Spinelli's secretary-bodyguard, who answered.

"Yes?"

"George, this is Laura Haynes. Is Phil around?"

Skalkottis hestitated. "He's pretty busy. Maybe he can call you back, huh?"

"I want to talk to him. It's important."

"Hold on," Skalkottis rumbled. "I'll tell him who's calling and we'll see."

A moment later Spinelli's voice came over crisply: "Laura?"

"Phil, have you seen the front page of the *Daily News* yet?"

"Damn right, I've seen it. I saw it right after I left you this morning. I tried to get the edition killed, but I was too late. It was the final, and it was already on the stands everyplace."

"Phil, that was my picture right there on the front page! I'm ruined! Everyone will know—"

"Calm down, baby, calm down. Listen, I'm working hard to fix things up right now. The *Post* had the same picture for the afternoon edition, but I got it killed on the grounds that you weren't booked and so it would be libelous to imply you were a prostitute. They got scared when I pulled that. And—"

"Sure, Phil, but that doesn't unprint the *News* photo, does it?"

"What are you afraid of? Laura, honey, you got the wrong idea. People aren't going to look close at that picture. They pick up the paper and it shows a bunch of women going into the clink. You happen to be the first in line, that's all. But they don't pay any special attention to the faces. Inside of two minutes after they've turned the page, they forget what they

saw."

"But some people *will* notice. My friends—the people in my house—"

"How many of your friends read the *Daily News*, anyway?" Spinelli asked.

"That isn't the point. They'll *get* to see it, somehow. Somebody will notice, and the phonecalls will start going around. I'll be ruined, Phil!"

Spinelli was silent for a moment. Then he said, "Would it make you happy if I transferred you to San Francisco for a couple of months?"

"Would that help?"

"I could set you up there until, say, October. Same pay, same kind of clientele, only West Coast people. Then if you wanted you could come back here. By that time everything would blow over."

"I don't know—"

"You don't like Frisco? Hell, I got branches everywhere. You want to go to Montreal? St. Louis? Chicago? Detroit? Just say the word, Laura."

"Let me just stay here and calm down for a couple of days," she told him. "Then maybe I'll move on. I don't know. I'm so mixed-up right now, Phil. So goddam terribly mixed up."

She got off the phone, went to the sideboard, fixed herself a drink. She stared into the glass for a long time before she raised it to her lips. The newspaper lay on the floor nearby, the incriminating front page staring up at her. She wondered if the doorman had glanced at the photo and had thought of comparing it with the face of the tenant known as Miss Haynes. She wondered how long it would be before she got her eviction notice from the management.

Spinelli would take care of it, she thought, bitterly. Spinelli takes care of everything. He got her the apartment in the first place, and with a little judicious fixing he would make it possible for her to keep it. Unless, of course, she chose to accept a transfer and do her whoring in San Francisco or Montreal or Chicago or Detroit or some other city on Spinelli's circuit.

But everything was smashed. McDermott ruined —well, that was his own fault, she had to admit. Still, he had offered her a princely deal, and now it was shattered. Dan . . . he would probably go out and get good and drunk and swear off women for the rest of his life, after this latest demonstration of their faithlessness.

So I better stick to what I've got, she thought. *I'll go on being a high-priced party girl, and I'll salt away more money in the savings bank, and I'll buy shares of American Tel & Tel, and I'll grow rich. I won't ever have children or love or a husband, but at least I'll have plenty of money.*

Spinelli was a slick devil. It was hard to hate him, except when you looked past the mask to the monster beneath, and then you saw what a cesspool he was. Spinelli could fix anything. Spinelli could glibly lead girl after girl into prostitution, by promising the moon and delivering it. Laura hadn't had any experience with the dope-peddling part of Spinelli's enterprises, but she could guess that he operated the same way there, mainpulating his deluded pushers and the deluded addicts, giving them all what they thought they wanted and milking off plenty for Phil Spinelli, Esquire.

Laura finished her drink. She put the bottle away

quickly. It would be so easy to go on, drinking sip after sip, until she lay sprawled out naked and unconscious on the floor, her troubles temporarily blotted out by liquor. But that was no solution.

Nothing was.

There *was* no solution.

She turned on the radio. Mindless music flooded the apartment. Laura stretched out on the bed, listening to the vapid tunes, the talentless rock'n'roll yammering, the caterwauling lyrics, and the music flooded her, shutting off her mind. She listened for hours. The station played nothing but music, and in between numbers a disk-jockey went on and on with juvenile drivel aimed at his audience of morons of all ages. Laura barely listened to the words, to the meaning. The pure sound flowed through her, like a narcotic coursing in her veins. Every hour on the half hour there was a news broadcast, but she paid no attention to what they were saying.

The afternoon moved along, and darkness began to descend over New York. It was five o'clock now, six, seven, seven-fifteen. Laura did not get up. She felt utterly weary, without the strength necessary to get up and dress and have dinner. She just wanted to lie there and listen to the music . . .

The news was being broadcast again.

Words impinged on Laura's consciousness.

Horrible words.

"Three people were injured this afternoon, one of them critically, in a two-car crackup on the East River Drive. Martin Farber, 43, and his wife Phyllis, 39, escaped with minor cuts and bruises when their northbound car was struck from behind by a foreign

car driven by Daniel Bittner, 28, of Manhattan. Bittner was taken to Bellevue Hospital with broken ribs, internal injuries, and a possible skull fracture. Police said he was intoxicated while drivxing. At the hospital just before entering sedation, Bittner said he had been despondent over personal affairs and had let go of the wheel of his car in an attempt at suicide. The Farber car, he said, had cut unexpectedly in front of him after he had lost control of his own vehicle. He will face criminal charges after his discharge from the hospital."

"No," Laura whimpered. "Not Dan. Not Dan!"

It was an hallucination, she told herself. Her overstrained mind had invented the news broadcast. Dan had not really done a thing like that.

But he had. At eight, Laura turned the dial to another station that broadcast the news, and they carried the story too—with the additional comment that Bittner was now in very critical condition, and doctors at Bellevue were not sure he would pull through.

Laura was numb. Everyone she had come in contact with had, in some way, met destruction. Perhaps it was not her fault that Marilyn had died, or that McDermott's life had been wrecked. They had made their own choices, and their roads had brought them to tragedy. But Dan—there was no evading the self-condemnation there. She had known right from the start that it was wrong to let him fall in love with her not knowing the truth. Yet she had been unable to break away. And he had done the expected, once the shocking truth about her had been revealed to him.

Marilyn . . . Bob McDermott . . . Dan Bittner . . . the only one who had not found her a deadly jinx thus far was Spinelli. But the dark gods protected Spinelli. He had nothing to fear from anyone.

For more than an hour Laura debated with herself about going to the hospital. She wanted to; she wanted to throw herself at Dan's feet, to apologize for having deceived him in this way, to plead with him to find the strength to remain alive. Yet at the same time she feared going to see him—feared his scorn, or, worse, his tears. She was unworthy of him. Unworthy of loving him, unworthy of visiting him in the hospital.

But finally she decided she had to go. It was past nine o'clock, now, and half an hour more went by before the taxi dropped her off at Bellevue.

In the lobby they told her inflexibly: "Visiting time ends at eight p.m."

"I know, I know. But he may die by morning. Don't you make exceptions for dying people?"

The nurse on duty frowned. "Who is it you would like to see?"

"Bittner, Dan Bittner. He was in the auto accident on the East River Drive this afternoon. They said on the radio that he was in critical condition, that they weren't sure he'd last the night. I *have* to see him, don't you understand? This may be my—my last chance."

The nurse looked more sympathetic. "Are you a relative of Mr. Bittner?"

"I'm——I'm his fiancee," Laura said. "We were going to be married. But—" She stopped, forcing the tears to remain back. It was almost the truth, wasn't

it? Why did this woman have to stand in her way, blocking her when Dan lay perhaps dying upstairs?

The nurse's expression softened further. "Let me check upstairs. It's irregular to have visitors admitted this late, but we do make exceptions in—in certain instances." She picked up a telephone receiver and asked for an extension. Laura listened eagerly as she spoke to a nurse upstairs. "Yes . . . ask the doctor if Bittner can have a visitor."

There was a pause. Laura said, "Is he conscious?"

"Semi-conscious," the woman said. "He's been in a coma most of the afternoon, she said, but they told me he's out of it now. Oh." She listened for a moment. Then she said to Laura, "The doctor says he's in very shaky shape, but that any close relatives can be admitted for very brief spells. Could I have your name, please?"

"Haynes. Miss Laura Haynes."

"We'll have to check, of course," the nurse said. "I mean, all sorts of people try to get upstairs under false pretenses, and—"

Laura gasped in horror, but it was too late; the nurse at the desk was saying into the mouthpiece, "Her name is Laura Haynes. She's Mr. Bittner's fiancee."

There was another moment of hesitation. Then the desk nurse put the telephone down. When she looked up at Laura her expression was stony, bleakly hostile.

She said, "I'm sorry, Miss Haynes."

"But—"

"They checked with Mr. Bittner," the nurse said coldly. "Mr. Bittner said that he did not want

to see you under any circumstances. I'm sorry, Miss Haynes. We can't admit you."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

LAURA DREAMED OF DAN THAT NIGHT. She dreamed that somehow the mistakes of the past had magically been undone— that she had never gone to McCarten's that day, had never been raped, had never embarked on the chain of events that had ultimately brought her to Phil Spinelli. And, so, Dan had never tried to kill himself on the East River Drive. But they had met, though—that much of the past remained unchanged in her dream—and they had fallen in love, and now they were getting married.

She dreamed of a small wedding, just a few friends on hand. She stood at Dan's side, gleaming in her white dress of virginity, and after the ceremony they made a quick escape, getting into Dan's little car and heading upstate for a honeymoon in a secluded mountain resort. By sundown, they had eaten and were alone in their room, and they smiled at each other shyly, Laura a virgin and Dan an inexperienced man, and with hesitant fingers Dan began to undress her, opening her bra, laying bare her young, full breasts that no man had ever touched, and finally her body was naked to his, and he was undressed too, his body slim and manly, and he took her uncertainly in his arms, just as frightened as she was, and they kissed, a timid kiss at first, then more passionate until it inflamed them both, and in one moment of blazing happiness she surrendered to him, and she heard him mutter "I love you, Laura" as her virginity vanished without pain, and their bodies were

moving together in perfect accord, every motion bringing incredible pleasure to both of them, and they were moving faster and faster now, his hand resting on the rising sweep of her breasts, she gripping the firm muscles of his back, and she felt the great throbbing contractions of fulfillment, and above her he was breathing deeply, and in another moment they would reach a thundering ecstasy, a perfect climax to their first act of love—

She woke.

She sat upright in bed, trembling. She had put pajamas on before going to bed, and they clung stickily to her skin, pasted to her body by perspiration. Angrily she ripped the pajamas off and flung them to the floor. Her loins ached; the dream seemed so vivid that for a moment she could not understand why Dan was not right here, next to her in the bed, and then she remembered that he was lying in the hospital, on the borderline between life and death, and he had refused to let her see him.

The bedside clock said three A.M. Laura tried to return to sleep. But sleep would not come; she twisted and turned, moving from one position to another without finding any comfort. Every nerve in her body was drawn tight. The dream still hovered with her, and it was almost as though she could feel Dan's hand tenderly cupping the fullness of her breasts, Dan's body lying between her thighs. But it was only a phantom of the night. She had never slept with him —and now she never would.

The hours dragged mercilessly on. At half past five, Laura decided it was pointless to try to sleep any more. She sat up at the edge of the bed, her

head bowed, supported by clenched fists, elbows on her thighs. She looked down at the heavy globes of her breasts. Her nipples tingled painfully from the imagined stimulation of her dream.

The sun was rising, now. Laura walked to the terrace and stepped out on it, still naked. The morning air was cool and fresh: the summer heat would not descend on the city for some hours yet. She stood there, feeling the river breeze caressing her naked breasts and bare loins, not caring whether anyone might look up from the street below and see her. For a long moment she stared down, many stories down to the street. It would be so easy to clamber up onto the little parapet and to float out into space, falling twelve, thirteen, fourteen floors. They would find her naked body later in the morning, the breasts flattened to ruin, the tapering flawless legs crushed and shattered.

Shaking her head, she walked back into the apartment and shut the terrace window. It was six in the morning now. The dream of love was far behind her, fading like the dream it had been. It no longer seemed to have even the semblance of reality to her.

She poured some juice, made some toast, put up a pot of coffee. She breakfasted morosely, too tired to care what she was eating or how it tasted. At half past seven she telephoned the hospital.

"I'd like to find out how Mr. Dan Bittner spent the night," she said.

"Just one moment," came the impersonal, disinterested voice from the hospital switchboard. "I will check on that information for you."

Laura waited. A moment or two later, the operator said, "Pardon me. Are you a relative of his?"

"I'm—a friend," Laura said. "A very close friend of his."

"I'm sorry, then. Mr. Bittner died during the night."

"Oh," Laura said, in a small voice. She had been expecting it. It came as no surprise. She had *known* he would not last the night. *And I never even said goodbye to him,* she thought sadly.

"His parents have been notified," the operator went on. "If you'll leave your name with me, I can give it to them when they arrive to claim the body, and they will get in touch with you concerning the funeral arrangements for him."

"That's all right," Laura said quietly. "It doesn't matter, about the funeral. I wouldn't want to see him dead. Thanks, though. Thanks."

She let the phone drop back into its cradle.

She felt no hysteria, no wild grief. There was only a lingering, festering bitterness, a cold rage against the universe that had designed events to turn out in this way.

I killed him, she thought acidly.

As sure as if I'd put a gun to his brain myself, I killed him. I ought to give myself up for murder. I knew all along that it would kill him to find out the truth about me. I should never have let him become involved with me. But I did. And I killed him.

She stared at the floor, thinking of the people she had known in New York, and what had happened to them. Marilyn . . . dead. McDermott . . . ruined. Dan . . . dead. At least one of those deaths was un-

questionably her fault. Marilyn's fate and McDermott's were simply coincidentally involved with her.

But still, it was a horrid trio of memories.

Rising, Laura paced the apartment, wondering about the course of her life since she had come to New York. She had earned a good deal of money, but that was her only positive accomplishment. On the credit side, money. On the debit side, betrayal of every ideal she had once known. She had sold her body, had deceived herself more than anyone else, had led a good and innocent young man to his death. She had mingled with lechers and perverts and pimps.

Not very pretty, is it? she asked herself.

Not at all. Somehow her life had gone off the track. Somehow instead of the show-business career she had come to New York to win, she had achieved success in whoredom instead. Nothing much to be proud of. Nothing much to wire home to the folks in Kansas.

She walked to the dresser drawer and opened it. A gun lay under a pile of blouses. It was a .22 that Spinelli had given her, to use as protection in case any burglar tried to force his way into her apartment. It was loaded, but she had never used it. It was a small, well-made, expensive-looking little gun. The low-caliber bullet it fired would not always kill, but it could cripple—and if it hit a vital area it could destroy.

She took the gun out and balanced it on her palm. All she had to do was wrap a finger round the trigger, lift the gun to her temple, and fire. She would die instantly. There would be none of the lingering horror of poison, or the deadly terror of the long wait

before your hurtling body reached the street. A tightening of one finger, and death would crash through her brain, ending a useless and empty life.

She slid her hand round the cold butt and raised the gun. Her finger quivered over the trigger. Her hand shook.

For a long moment she remained poised, on the brink of pulling the trigger. No one would miss her, she thought. The Kansas folks had probably already begun to forget her. Spinelli would miss her, sure. He'd miss the money she brought him, that's all. Dan would not miss her. Not now. She was of no importance to the universe. She was an enemy of society.

She deserved to die, she told herself.

But the finger resting on the trigger remained relaxed. She did not fire. She sat motionless, hardly breathing, while the battle raged inside her mind. *End it, end it,* part of her shrilled. *Why go on? Money isn't everything. Life isn't worth living if you can't respect yourself. You might just as well pull the trigger.*

But the reply came quickly, anguishedly: *No, don't. Death is too final. If you live, there's always time to repent, to change, to atone for the harm you've done. Suicide is a coward's way out. It would be the last sniveling act of a weak and worthless person. It takes guts to go on living from one day to the next. It takes courage to try to repair the mess you've made of your life.*

Slowly, she let the gun down.

The tension broke. She was slick with her own sweat, and her heart raced dizzingly. She went into the bathroom and got under the shower again, scrub-

bing the beads of sweat from her breasts and thighs and buttocks. She came out and began to dress—not in anything fancy, just a simple dress of the kind she wore back in the dim days before Spinelli.

By ten o'clock she was ready to leave. Almost as an afterthought, she dropped the .22 into her handbag.

The morning was warm and bright, a perfect late-summer day with just the merest hint of the approaching autumn in the soft breeze coming down from the east. Laura considered taking a taxi, but decided against it. Her own legs were good enough. Besides, she didn't have very far to go.

It was half past ten by the time she reached Spinelli's apartment house. She had not walked rapidly. In New York, everyone sprints, but this morning Laura had chosen to stroll. She had plenty of time.

All the time in the world.

The doorman in the palatial lobby of Spinelli's building recognized her and smiled.

"Miss Haynes to see Mr. Spinelli?"

"That's right," Laura said.

In this building, no one went up unannounced. Laura waited while the doorman rang upstairs on the housephone and told Skalkottis that Miss Haynes was here to see Mr. Spinelli. Skalkottis rumbled an "Okay" so loudly that Laura heard it plainly. She walked into the waiting elevator and punched 20.

Skalkottis met her in the foyer as she stepped out of the elevator and into Spinelli's apartment. The hulking bodyguard said, "How come you didn't phone before you came over?"

Laura shrugged. "I didn't know I was coming.

I was out taking a walk, and all of a sudden I realized I was right near Phil's place, so I figured I'd stop up and say hello. I haven't been here for a while."

"Phil has some visitors," Skalkottis said uncertainly.

"That's all right. He won't mind if I join them," Laura replied breezily. Before Skalkottis could stop her, she marched past him and into the long hallway, past all the rooms of breathtaking beauty, looking for Spinelli. She found him finally in the long room with the terrace, the enormous room where Spinelli had administered her final exam before graduating her into his staff.

He had two visitors.

He looked up in surprise as she swept into the room. "Laura—"

"Hello, Phil. I'm not disturbing anything, am I?"

She looked at the two visitors. One of them was a girl of about nineteen. She was stark naked. She was a tall, virginal-looking blonde, with thin soft golden hair. Right at this moment she was blushing practically all over. She was lovely, in a soft, pale kind of way, with round high breasts and tender-looking thighs. She was staring at Laura in surprise, and in an automatic gesture of modesty before another woman she was ineffectually trying to cover her loins with one hand and both her breasts with the other. She looked extremely naked, extremely young, extremely frightened. Obviously a new candidate for Spinelli's stable, being shown off by her discoverer to Spinelli.

The other person in the room was Ned Mc-

Carten. That was just perfect, Laura thought. It was better than she could have dared to hope for.

She sized the situation up: McCarten had found this girl and had brought her direct to Spinelli himself. McCarten now looked shamefaced and uncertain, as though he wanted to sink into the deep pile carpeting.

Laura said, "Hello, Ned. Long time no see."

"H-hello, Laura."

"You don't have to cringe like that," Laura said calmly. "What you did to me is ancient history, Ned. I've been through the mill plenty since the day you raped me." She smiled at the naked blonde. "And this is the new one, eh? Very nice, Ned. Phil, are you going to give her a job?"

Spinelli looked annoyed. "Now, listen, Laura, you can't come busting in here—"

"Sure I can. I just did." She realized Skalkottis was standing behind her. But Spinelli would not dare to have her manhandled—not in front of a potential candidate. The naked girl looked about to faint. She was cramming her full breasts into a bra, now, and reaching for panties. The audition had suddenly become much too public to suit her, it seemed.

To the girl, Laura said, "I'm Laura Haynes. I'm also one of McCarten's discoveries. Remind me to tell you someday about how he 'discovered' me. Maybe you got the same treatment yourself."

Spinelli was scowling. "Laura, I'll have to ask you to wait outside until—"

"I won't," Laura snapped. She stepped back and to the side, so there was solid wall behind her and not the possibly menacing Skalkottis. "I want to talk to

this girl. I want to tell her to get her clothes on and get out of here before it's too late."

"Are you out of your mind, Laura?" Spinelli shouted.

"No! I'm *in* my mind, at long last," she tossed back at him. In a quieter voice she said, "He's dead, Phil."

"Who is?"

"Dan Bittner."

"And who the blazes is he?"

"I loved him," Laura said quietly. "Remember, you suspected I might be carrying on on the side? Well, I was. I never slept with him. He was too innocent for that. He loved me, I think, and he wanted to marry me. But he killed himself the day my picture got into the papers with the label *whore* underneath it."

Spinelli moistened his lips. "You're drunk, Laura. If you've got anything to say to me, wait until I can see you in private. George—"

"Don't touch me!" she warned Skalkottis. To Spinelli she said, "I'm not drunk. I just came here to tell you that I was through with the call-girl business. You hear me? *Through.* The only decent person I ever knew in my life is on a slab in the basement of a hospital right now, and you sit here like a bloated spider in your web, and here's some new girl ready to be turned into a whore."

"Get her out of here!" Spinelli grated.

Laura stepped back. "Keep your hands off me," she told Skalkottis. "I'm warning you, don't lay a finger on me, you ape."

"The boss wants you to wait outside," Skalkottis

said in a surprisingly gentle voice. "Why you want to make all this trouble, huh? You shouldn't come in here and shout at him like that. You did all right by him, didn't you?"

Suddenly Laura knew what she had come here to do. In one quick flash of understanding, she realized what her purpose in existence was.

She opened her handbag. The cold little .22 leaped into her hand.

Skalkottis jumped back, startled. Laura's finger slid round the trigger.

She fired.

There was an explosion that seemed incredibly loud for so small a gun, and a violent shaft of pain ran up Laura's arm. A crater erupted in Skalkottis' throat. Hit at five feet's distance, the little slug practically blew his throat apart. A gout of blood coursed out of severed arteries; he uttered a thick, wordless moan and sank to his knees, clutching the wound and trying to hold it closed.

The half-naked blonde screamed. McCarten cowered. Spinelli rose to his feet in astonishment.

Smiling, Laura swung round to face Spinelli. He was groping in a desk-drawer, now, obviously searching for a weapon. His well-groomed face looked pale and frightened, and his eyes were very wide.

Laura fired again.

She aimed for his chest, but the gun kicked hard, and the bullet entered him low, in the stomach, hardly six inches above the top of the desk. He grabbed his belly and staggered back, away from the desk.

Shrieking, McCarten broke from his seat and dashed across the room. He presented his full back

to Laura, who aimed with skill that surprised her, and squeezed the trigger a third time. The bullet caught McCarten between the shoulderblades; he howled and went sprawling. Laura took a deep breath. The blonde, with her panties still halfway up her hips, had fallen flat and was moaning hysterically. Skalkottis lay face-down in a pool of gushing blood, not moving at all. McCarten did not seem to be moving either. Spinelli, still alive, was writhing feebly and clutching his belly.

Laura walked calmly toward the girl and lifted her to her feet.

"Don't worry," Laura said. "I'm not after you. Just these worms." She looked at Spinelli. Her voice was rock-steady as she said, "The police could never stop you, Phil. You knew too many people, you had too much pull. They'd never pin anything on you that you couldn't wriggle out of. And you'd go on, getting richer and richer, leading girl after girl into filth and sin."

"*Laura* . . ." he muttered

"You didn't expect this, did you?" she asked. "You figured you'd live forever, that no one could possibly catch you or stop you. Well, you were wrong. You're lying there in your own blood, and you're going to die, Phil. You're going to die right now. All the pull in the world can't save you, Phil."

She lifted the gun.

She fired again, aiming carefully.

The shot caught Spinelli in the chest. He had risen to his knees, but the impact of the bullet threw him down flat. He lay still.

Laura let the gun drop to the floor. She realized

she was almost at the point of collapse.

Killing myself wouldn't have accomplished anything, she thought. *But now I've done something for society, something that society couldn't do for itself. Maybe they'll send me to the chair for it, but at least Phil Spinelli is dead and the world's a cleaner place for what I've done.*

She looked at the blonde. The girl was dazed and stunned.

Laura said, "Why were you here, honey?"

"They—they were going to give me a job, they said. And before I knew it they were taking my clothes off, and then you came in—"

"Are you a virgin?" she asked.

The girl shook her head. "No. Not really. There was this fellow back home—he said he loved me. But I only did it with him once. And then I came to New York. But—oh, I'm all frightened now! Did you kill them?"

"I killed them," Laura said. "Stone dead. Get your clothes on and get out of here, now. Go back home to that boyfriend of yours and marry him. And if anyone asks you, you were never here."

The girl nodded and hastily began to dress. Laura walked to the telephone at Spinelli's desk. She dialed the operator.

"Give me the police," she said.

There was a click. "Police headquarters."

"Hello," she said. "My name is Laura Haynes. I've just killed Phil Spinelli and two of his men." In a calm, mechanical voice, she gave the address and hung up.

She felt clean, now.

Perhaps they would send her to the chair; perhaps they would free her as a public benefactor. It didn't matter. She had absolved herself now of her personal sin, and if society insisted on her death she would not mind. At least she had bought back her soul from Phil Spinelli. At least she was pure again.

She smiled. She walked to the window, and sat down by the terrace to wait for the wailing sirens.

THE END

OTHER NIGHTSTAND BOOKS
YOU'LL WANT TO READ

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LUST CLUB
SEX GANG
GANG GIRL
CAMPUS TRAMP
CARNIVAL OF LUST
THE WILD NIGHT
SUMMERTIME AFFAIR
BORN FOR SIN

ON SALE AT YOUR NEWSDEALER

ON THE STREET...

was their affectionate way of saying, "I'm becoming a prostitute." And so Laura Haynes went on the street. It seemed the only way out after coming to New York to become an actress, after getting raped in an agent's office, after meeting Marilyn, the sad girl who could only find satisfaction in the arms of another woman. It was a way of making it big in the big town, and Laura wanted that. She also wanted to become a high-priced call girl in the Syndicate, and if Spinelli could do that for her, she'd . . .

...SELL HERSELF CHEAP!